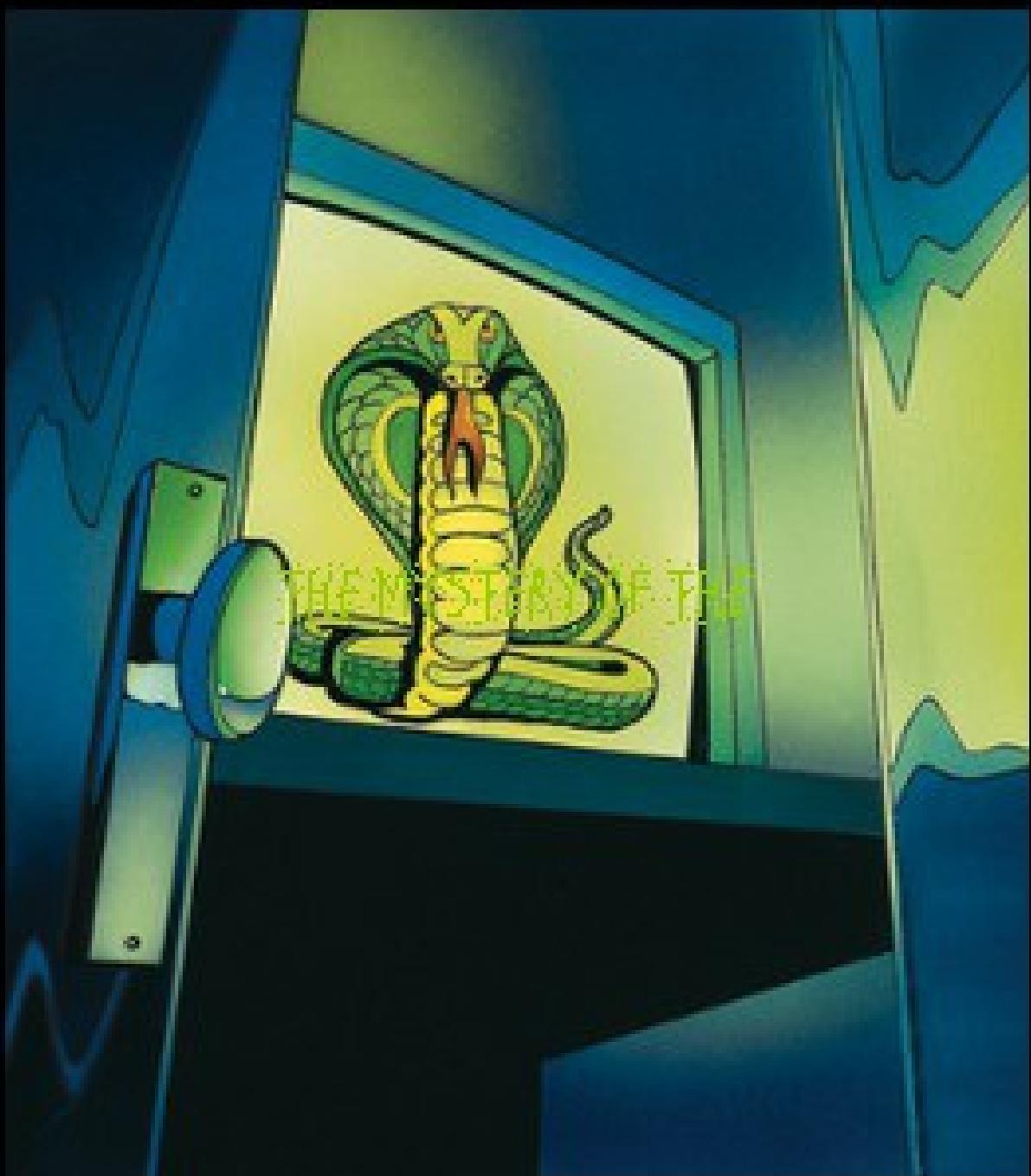


THE
INVESTIGATORS
in

THE MYSTERY OF THE
CODED COBRA



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Ten-year-old Julia receives an e-mail—from her dead brother Ted! She asks The Three Investigators for help. Before giving them all the details, the girl suddenly disappears. What remains is only the e-mail on her computer, and in it is a gruesome picture of a threatening cobra. What does this mean? Who is the sender of the e-mail? But most importantly, where is the girl? With only limited clues, Jupiter, Pete and Bob set out to investigate.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Coded Cobra

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*Based on characters created by
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Die drei ???: Codename: Cobra

(The Three ???: Code Name: Cobra)

by

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1. Kids' Stuff

"I don't get it, I just don't get it!" Jupiter stared at the computer screen, pulled his hair again, which was now standing off his head in all directions, and then walked around the trailer hectically. "I just can't figure this out!"

"Self-knowledge is the first step to improvement," said Bob, unmoved from his armchair and leafed further through his magazine, *Musicworld*. He had been listening to his friend's ranting for half an hour now, so his pity for him had gradually exhausted.

Jupiter stopped abruptly, sparkled angrily at his friend and took a deep breath to say something, but all that came out was a sorrowful groan, in which lay all the frustration that had accumulated in Jupiter's mind. Then he began to move again, sighing heavily.

Pete, lying on his stomach on the floor, quickly pulled his sports magazine towards him. "Hey! Watch your step!" he snarled at Jupe and gave him an angry look. He was also severely annoyed, because since Jupe had jumped up from the computer with a loud scream about half an hour ago, he had gasped to himself: 'This can't be true!' about 125 times. Pete vowed to himself that he would gag his friend next time.

Surely it was bad for Jupiter that he had accidentally deleted a partition on the computer's hard disk drive. Surely it would be a monumental task to recover all the records The Three Investigators had collected in the course of their detective career once again from the piecemeal backups on several portable hard disks and the countless dusty folders that were stacked everywhere in their headquarters. And surely it was a catastrophe above all because it had happened to Jupiter Jones—the mastermind of their detective agency, of all people.

Since the detective trio had taken on their first case in the distant past, Jupiter had hardly ever made a mistake like this, as far as Pete could remember. Almost always it had been he himself or Bob who had made the odd slip-up. "But heaven forbid!" rebuked Pete in his thoughts. At some point there must be an end to the 'I can't believe it!', the 'No, please don't!', the 'This can't be true!' and the incessant up-and-down rants!

"Just sit down quietly and wait for that computer geek to come." Pete slammed his magazine down and got up off the floor. "You're usually Mr Let's-Be-Reasonable and you always know exactly when something is pointless and when it isn't! Then why don't you get it now? There's no need for all this whining and ranting around here! There's nothing you can do except hope that that guy can do something to recover the hard disk! Gimme a break, man!"

Of course Jupiter had called the computer emergency service shortly after his mishap. But the people were in great demand and didn't leave everything just because Jupiter Jones had a problem—even though he expected exactly that from them.

"He should have been here by now," the First Investigator complained reproachfully for the umpteenth time.

"Jupe!" Bob slammed his magazine with a sigh. "Until that guy comes, how about we do exactly what we were going to do here today, huh? What do you say?"

Jupe opened his mouth. "I'm supposed to clean up? ... Now?"

Bob nodded. "It will calm you down."

Jupiter looked at his friend as if he had just suggested a four-week zero diet. And the somewhat fuller figure of the First Investigator clearly showed that exactly that would have been the most cruel of all tortures. But the three of them had really met at their headquarters to clean up the mess. But after Jupiter's collapse, of course, that was out of the question—if only because he needed all the space he could get at Headquarters to sweat out his desperation and impatience in a forced march that was completely untypical for him.

Headquarters was the office of The Three Investigators. Others, however, would have described it more as an old mobile home trailer that was positioned amidst all kinds of junk at The Jones Salvage Yard, owned and operated by Jupiter's uncle Titus and aunt Mathilda.

This trailer housed just about everything a thriving detective agency needed—a telephone with a fax machine, an answering machine, a photocopier and even a darkroom and a small crime laboratory... and of course, those dozens of files, hundreds of magazines and newspapers and probably thousands of pieces of paper, all of which had to be searched and sorted out. And last but not least, there was the computer with Internet access that Jupiter had so shamelessly betrayed earlier.

Of course, the First Investigator vehemently denied the first suspicions of his friends that he might have tampered with the computer's operating system—'Nonsense, Bob, I know what I am doing!'—or even messed up the hard disk settings—'Nonsense, Pete, what are you thinking of?'

"Someone who has absolutely no idea about hard disk partitioning messed around with it," was the first thing the computer expert noticed when he finally arrived after another ten minutes and took a cursory look. "I can't immediately tell you whether it can be restored. I'll have to check first. At worst, the data on the hard disk is corrupted and cannot be restored."

The young man, whose long hair was shaggy, turned to The Three Investigators and looked at them reproachfully. "Gentlemen! This is not kids' stuff. Those who don't know how to change hard disk partitions should keep their hands off it!"

Slowly, very slowly, Pete and Bob turned to Jupiter and looked at him in the face with a meaningful and extremely sweet smile.

"I know what I am doing," Bob whispered.

"What are you thinking of?" Pete said.

Jupiter was silent and avoided their looks uncertainly. Then he cleared his throat artificially. "Um, well, I... I thought," he finally stammered with a bright red head, "I thought that if I was here at disk management..."

Pete and Bob rolled their eyes and turned away from their friend, moaning loudly, to leave him to his fate. The last spark of pity died suddenly in them and both secretly hoped that the computer expert would leave Jupiter sitting in his deep, deep hole where he would suffer the most terrible agony. After all, Jupiter's tampering could have sent the whole computer into technical nirvana, and not just the data in the hard disk. And that would have been a major setback for their agency, because Bob, as the person in charge of research and records, had collected everything in there from the more than a hundred cases they had solved so far. Hours and hours of work would have been lost—not to mention the findings and facts that might have been useful to them in the future.

But the expert did not do them this favour. He saved Jupiter. He managed to restore the partition using a recovery utility. Of course, Jupiter wanted to know what had actually happened when he changed the settings and suddenly there was one partition less on the hard disk. Curious, he dug out from the computer specialist more and more information about hard disks, and the specialist was increasingly happy to share his knowledge. At last, he had found a new computer disciple to share his secrets with.

"Probably our computer will soon be able to do laundry, repair cars and whisk milk shakes," Pete mocked so that only Bob could hear.

Bob let out air contemptuously. "And the day will come when all of us will be cyber slaves."

For a while, they listened to the incomprehensible gibberish exchanged between Jupiter and the over-enthusiastic computer guru. Then they turned back to their magazines. It was clear to both of them that they would never enter these spheres of computer technology—and would never want to. This was, as they admitted to themselves without envy, only something for mastermind Jupiter Jones.

After about half an hour, Mikey the chatty computer angel, left Headquarters. On his way out, he gave Pete and Bob another pitiful look, which clearly expressed what he thought about people who weren't interested in the guts of a computer. On the other hand, he patted Jupe on the shoulder appreciatively and even invited him to stop by his shop sometime. He would like to show him a few more tricks. Then Jupiter accompanied him out the salvage yard.

"I don't want to know," Pete said apparently incoherently when Jupe returned to the trailer.

"What? What don't you want to know?" the First Investigator asked.

"I don't want to know what Mikey taught you!" Pete grinned.

"You mean the thing with the hard disk partition?" Jupiter said as he sat down enthusiastically at the computer again. "Yes, that's really something," he continued without giving a thought to what Pete had actually wanted to tell him. "Highly dangerous! Because in the partition table—"

"Jupe!" cried Pete and Bob almost simultaneously.

"Save your efforts! We're not interested!" Pete added.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door.

"He can't last three minutes without you," Bob scoffed and nodded sullenly at the trailer door.

"That must be love!" grinned Pete.

Jupiter gave him an ironic grimace. "Mikey must have forgotten something," he said, slightly offended, and went to the door and opened it.

But it wasn't Mikey who knocked. It was an intimidated and even a little frightened looking girl of maybe nine or ten years old standing outside looking uncertainly into the trailer.

"Hello," she said with a thin voice. "Are you The Three Investigators?"

Jupiter wrinkled his forehead and then said somewhat surprised: "Uh, yes, yes, we are. What can... we do for you?"

The girl swallowed, then sniffed barely audibly, and suddenly a tear rolled down her right cheek.

Jupiter blinked embarrassed and began to knead his fingers. Uncertain, he looked over his shoulder. There Pete sat up in his armchair, put the magazine aside and stammered a silly 'um', while Bob was at least quick-witted enough to invite the girl in with an uncertain hand gesture. It was obvious to all three boys that they did not really know how to react in such a situation.

"You... you..." the girl sobbed and stepped carefully closer. "You can help Teddy, can't you? You can help him, can't you?"

Jupiter frowned. "Uh, who? Who should we help?"

The girl wiped the tears from her cheek. Then she looked at Jupiter with wide eyes and finally said with her thin voice: "My Teddy! You have to help my Teddy!"

2. Question After Question

For a second, Pete struggled with a violent laugh that irresistibly tickled his throat. But the heart-breaking sight of the unhappy girl made him swallow the laugh again immediately, so that only a strange, muffled gurgle escaped him.

The other two investigators were similarly confused as Pete in view of the girl's request. Bob involuntarily took a step back and noisily opened his lower jaw, while Jupe blinked as if a swarm of flies had got into his eyes. But finally it was him who was the first to regain his composure.

"I think," he said carefully, "there's been a misunderstanding. While our company motto states that—"

"Jupe!" Bob hissed and shook his head vigorously.

"What is it?" Jupe snapped irritably.

Bob took a step forward and pushed Jupiter gently but firmly to the side before he explained to his friend that his habit of often expressing himself more complicated than necessary was certainly not appropriate at the moment. Bob preferred to take matters into his own hands, so he leaned down to the girl with a friendly smile and said in a sugar-sweet voice: "Well, we are detectives. You know what that is, huh?"

The girl drew a sniff through her nose and nodded. "You catch thieves and murderers and stuff," she said softly.

Bob laughed overly understanding. "Well, we haven't had to hunt down murderers yet, thank goodness, but we have often handled thieves very well. But, you know, we don't have much experience with teddy bears." Bob tried to look like a sad teddy bear. "And they could have who knows what illnesses, I've been told... I think it's better if you ask your mummy. She would know what is best to do for your teddy bear, wouldn't she?"

Bob looked over his shoulder and caught Pete's admiring looks, and Jupiter's pouty expression. There was a flash of appreciation for Bob's skilful handling of the child, although he otherwise couldn't stand it when the leader of their detective agency took the helm out of his hand.

But the girl just looked at Bob with a mixture of confusion and incredulity, and then said calmly and almost emotionlessly: "But my mummy is dead."

Bob winced. "Your mummy is... dead?" he stammered. Jupiter and Pete were startled and now looked at the child attentively.

The girl nodded. "She died when I was born."

"Oh, that's..." Bob said with concern, "I'm so—"

"And I wasn't talking about a teddy bear either," the girl said to him and added something insulting. "I meant my brother. His name is Ted, but I always call him Teddy."

Unsettled, she looked at the three boys one by one, and almost seemed to doubt whether it was really right to come here to the famous Three Investigators.

And Jupiter, Pete and Bob really did look a little embarrassed. A basic rule of detective practice, which they all knew very well, was that one should approach a case as impartially as possible without jumping to conclusions. As far as this principle was concerned, they had just behaved like complete novices.

"Now... let's start all over again," Jupiter took the initiative and waved his hands as if he wanted to scare all the previous misunderstandings out of the trailer. "Please tell us your name first."

"Julia, my name is Julia Applegate." By now, the girl had overcome almost all her shyness, to which the unprofessional conduct of The Three Investigators had certainly contributed. "And my brother told me to ask for your help."

Bob tried an engaging smile. It was best not to make assumptions, he thought to himself. So Bob formulated the next question as innocently as possible and spoke as friendly as possible: "But why doesn't your brother come to us himself?"

"Because he can't," Julia replied in surprise.

Bob paused. "Well, then he's not... kind of... well, I mean..." He shook his head and smiled silly.

Julia looked at him as expectantly and questioningly as Jupiter and Pete.

The girl then continued: "He sent me an e-mail telling me that he is in big trouble and I should come to you for help."

Pete bent forward a little. "And what is the big trouble he is in?" he asked sceptically.

"Teddy hasn't said anything about that," Julia replied. "But I am to ask you to come with me to our meeting place tomorrow."

Jupiter scratched his chin. "And that's where he will turn up?"

Julia's gaze showed that she couldn't do much with this question. "Yes, I think so," she said hesitantly. But she instinctively noticed that a hardly tangible mistrust had awakened in The Three Investigators, and almost imperceptibly the shy flickering in their eyes glowed again.

"How old is your brother?" Bob wanted to know.

Julia visibly ducked her head. "He... he's 24 years old. He turned 24 in May."

"And why did he not go to the police or your father with his problems?" Jupe continued to probe.

The first tear came from the corner of Julia's eye again. "I... I don't know," she swallowed. "Maybe it's because they will say that Teddy, that Teddy, that Teddy..." Sobbing heavily, Julia broke off and hid her face behind her hands.

With short, quick glances, The Three Investigators communicated with each other, and each of them thought pretty much the same thing—something was not right here. A twenty-four-year-old who sent his little sister to get help... who had troubles that he hid from his sister for some reason... difficulties that he didn't confide in the police or his father because they might say something about him? Perhaps he might be lying about something? Perhaps he was a hopeless case? Or something worse? And then he couldn't come himself today, but wanted to show up at a certain meeting place tomorrow. That didn't sound like much of a confidence builder to them.

They might be dealing with a criminal who took advantage of the good faith of his little sister to get himself out of trouble with the help of The Three Investigators! Or even worse, he dragged the three into his mess for whatever reason. No, that didn't sound good at all—not at all.

On the other hand, a child stood before them, who at the moment was literally melting away and being shaken by intermittent fits of crying. Could such an innocent, trusting girl even have a homicidal brother who was up to no good? It was hard to imagine.

Bob slowly went over to Julia, tapped her awkwardly on the shoulder and handed her a fresh handkerchief he had found in his trouser pocket.

Julia took it, squeaked a ‘thank you’, snorted strongly into it and then pressed the damp handkerchief back into the hand of the baffled Bob. Then she lifted her head and looked at all three boys from her tear-stained face.

“You,” she whimpered haltingly, “you... you’re helping Teddy, right? You are, aren’t you? Right?”

3. Escape to the Afterlife

"I don't know, fellas. I don't have a good feeling about this." Pete looped his bicycle chain lock around the lamp post, put it through the frame of his bike and locked it. Then he waited until Jupiter and Bob were ready.

"Julia was standing in our headquarters crying. You mean you would have sent her home just like that?" Jupiter defended himself panting and supported himself with his hands on his thighs.

He hated cycling, just as he was extremely hostile to anything associated with excessive physical exertion. But Pete had insisted that they ride their bikes here to the outskirts of Rocky Beach, where the Applegates lived. And since Jupiter had been the one who had promised Julia that The Three Investigators would meet her brother today, he had to give in at least as far as cycling was concerned.

Pete and Bob actually wanted to talk to Julia's father about the whole matter first, but Julia had pleaded so fervently that they shouldn't do that. Jupiter finally gave in to her wish without any ifs and buts.

"I still think that we should have talked to her father first." Bob nodded grimly and locked his bicycle with a monstrous U-lock. "After all, we are taking on the assignment of a ten-year-old girl without her parents' consent."

"She only has her father," Jupiter reminded him. "And maybe he's home now, so we can still talk to him if we can't avoid it. We have not established whether we have a case or not. As it is, we're just doing the girl a favour—that's how I see it."

Bob moaned a little more and then trotted grumpily behind the First Investigator, who now turned to the Applegates' house.

Julia had given them her address in the evening, where they were to meet up with her at eleven o'clock this morning. It was a street on the outskirts of Rocky Beach where wealthy residents would not necessarily have gone. It wasn't a run-down or even poor neighbourhood either, but one of those typical American suburban settlements where one house looked like another—simple wooden cottages with a verandah, and here and there a dormer or even a balcony stood behind well-tended, small lawns. At the roadside were the always same middle class cars parked in front of the always same mailboxes in the glowing August sun. There was also a car in front of the Applegates' house.

"Her father seems to be there," Pete said, pointing to the blue Ford.

"Well then," Jupiter replied and pointed to the terrace. Once there, he went up the three steps leading to the house entrance and rang the bell.

Less than two seconds later, they could hear someone in the house loudly rushing down a staircase, and a few moments later, the front door was ripped open with gusto.

"Julia! I ha..." The man paused in the middle of the sentence with his mouth open and stared at The Three Investigators in confusion.

"Mr Applegate?" Jupiter smiled engagingly and gave the man a quick look.

The man might have been in his middle or late forties, was not quite slim and looked a bit unkempt at the moment. The black sweatpants bulged out at his knees, the washed-out

sweatshirt was tucked in here and hung out of his trousers there, and Mr Applegate had apparently not shaved this morning either.

But most of all, Jupe was amazed by the expression on the man's face. It not only reflected the surprise at the unexpected visit of The Three Investigators but revealed something else—something that Jupiter had already seen in dozens of faces and which he therefore recognized immediately from his detective experience—fear. Mr Applegate was afraid!

"Uh, yes, yes, that's me," Mr Applegate stammered and drove nervously through his already slightly greying hair.

Restlessly, he let his gaze wander over The Three Investigators and then looked hurriedly over them into the street. "What, what can I do for you?" he asked them.

"We have an appointment here with Julia, your daughter," explained Jupiter. "She asked us to meet her here today at eleven o'clock."

"You wha..." Mr Applegate got the word stuck in his throat for the second time. "You're with... who, who are you anyway?"

Jupiter nested around his trouser pocket and then pulled out one of their business cards, where each of The Three Investigators always carried with them. With a nod, he handed it to Mr Applegate. The card said:



"You're... investigators?" The three boys saw it working its way into Mr Applegate's head. "But what has my Julia got to do with investigators? What did she want from you?" Again his gaze wandered to the street.

Bob took a step forward. He and Pete had of course also noticed that there was something wrong with Mr Applegate. "May we come in, Mr Applegate? I think there's something we ought to discuss with you."

With a quick sideways glance, Bob made it clear to Jupiter that he now considered this absolutely necessary, despite Julia's wishes. And Jupiter signalled with an imperceptible wink that he agreed.

"What? Uh, yes, yes, of course, yes." With a vague gesture of his hand, he asked the three boys to enter. One last time, he looked outside nervously, and then he closed the door.

"Mr Applegate," Bob began, when they arrived in a small, comfortably furnished living room and everyone had taken their seats. "Last evening Julia came to us and asked us—"

"Last evening? Julia was with you?" Applegate interrupted him abruptly.

Bob gave a surprise expression. "Uh, yes. We were a little surprised that a girl that young, all by herself."

"When?" Applegate slid impatiently forward in his chair.

The Three Investigators looked at each other briefly and then Jupiter said: "That must have been about six or six-thirty."

"Six or six-thirty? But..." thought Applegate, "but that's not—"

Suddenly the phone rang and it made Applegate jump as if he had an electric shock. Without another word, he got up and rushed to the phone which was placed on a small chest of drawers.

"Yes? Applegate!" he shouted breathlessly into the receiver.

Jupiter looked at Pete and Bob, put his finger on their lips and then pointed to his left ear as a sign that they should all be quiet and listen to the conversation.

"Chloe! Thank goodness! I called a few times earlier, but you weren't in. Julia should have been home by now! She's supposed to be—"

Applegate fell silent and for a few seconds, The Three Investigators heard nothing. But the next thing the man said made all three of them sit up and take notice, although it was only a single word he said. It was not what he said, but the way he said it that made the three of them shudder. This harsh 'What?' sounded so desperate that The Three Investigators looked at each other with the worst premonitions.

"She is..." groaned Applegate, "she was never with you? But, but... you spoke on the phone yesterday and we agreed that she... You didn't? She... never called? ... Oh, goodness... I knew it. I knew this was coming."

It took half an eternity until the call ended. And it took another half an eternity before Applegate set himself in motion again and shuffled towards the living room door.

But the man who finally appeared in the room was no longer Applegate—at least it was no longer the Applegate The Three Investigators had met a few minutes earlier. The man seemed to have aged years, his face had collapsed, his lips bloodless, he himself a head smaller, bowed down to fear.

"It's my fault... It's all my fault..." Applegate gasped and dropped onto an armchair. There he buried his face in his hands and made only muffled, incomprehensible noises.

The Three Investigators looked at each other in dismay. That phone call had been too clear for them not to have guessed what was going on. Julia had disappeared! She had apparently told her father yesterday that she was going to spend the night at a friend's house—Chloe—but she never got there and she hadn't even talked to the friend about it. Instead, she had come to the headquarters of The Three Investigators without her father's knowledge. But what happened afterwards?

Jupiter shook off the oppressive thoughts which crept into his brain like eerie ghosts, as he tried to concentrate. Now it was important to keep a cool head and to approach the matter systematically. Terrible fears served no one now, least of all, Julia.

"Mr Applegate," the First Investigator began cautiously. "We would like to help you, but to do so we need to know exactly what happened yesterday before Julia came to us. Maybe that will give us a clue so that we know why she didn't come home and why she didn't show up at her friend's house."

Applegate didn't even ask how Jupiter knew all this, but simply began to tell in a broken voice: "We had an argument. Julia came running out of her room in the afternoon, shouting that she had received a message from Ted, her brother. He was in a lot of trouble and had asked her for help, and so on. I then tried to calm her down, but she kept getting more and more into it. Eventually I lost my patience and sent her to her room..."

"When she came out about an hour later and asked me if she could stay at Chloe's place, I agreed. She seemed reasonable again, and I thought it best to give her some distraction." Applegate faltered, then obviously struggled with tears. "And now she is, she is... and only because I... I didn't—oh, goodness!"

The Three Investigators remained silent for a while, but then Jupiter took the floor again. "Mr Applegate, it was because of this that Julia came to see us yesterday evening. She asked

us to help her brother. Now we have..." Jupiter pushed around a little. "We promised her that we would meet her brother today. But you yourself obviously did not take her worries as seriously as you just told us. Well, this is exactly the view Julia expressed to us, namely that both the police and, um... you as well could not or would not help her in this matter. We did not understand her very well. Could you perhaps explain to us why Julia did not turn to you on this matter and why you do not consider your son's troubles to be so significant?" Jupiter had expressed himself cautiously. It wasn't meant to sound as if he thought that Applegate didn't care about his children's problems—although one could certainly get this impression after all that had happened.

Applegate slowly raised his head and looked Jupiter in the eye with a mixture of astonishment and endless sorrow. "Why I do not consider my son's troubles to be so significant?" he repeated Jupiter's question and smiled bitterly. "I can tell you that... because my son died in a car accident four weeks ago."

4. The Beast

“Wh... what?”

“What are you saying?”

“He is—but... but that’s impossible!”

The Three Investigators were thunderstruck. What Applegate had just said was too incredible. For a few moments, the three of them looked at each other in amazement and then stormed Julia’s father with their questions again.

“He... he was in an accident?” Bob stammered. “But then how could Julia...”

“In the car, you say?” Pete interrupted. “Four weeks ago? But then—”

“Then how could Julia even get a message from him?” Bob wondered and in turn drowned out Pete.

Jupe used the first breathing space of his two friends to finally ask his question: “So that’s why you didn’t take Julia seriously! But then, how did she get the idea—”

Applegate stood up suddenly and waved his hands frantically. “Stop! Stop! Please! ... I know that all this must sound strange and almost crazy to you, but I would like to ask you to leave now. I’m sure you’ll understand if I want to be alone.”

The Three Investigators fell silent for a few seconds. Each of them immediately realized that they had not acted tactfully. Instead of showing sympathy for a father who had learned a few minutes ago that his daughter had disappeared, their detective temperament had run away with them and they had nothing else on their minds but to clear up any inconsistencies.

On the other hand, these very inconsistencies were so strange that Jupiter at least wanted to make another attempt to shed light on the matter. However, in order not to continue to appear rude, he stood up and pretended to leave. Then he addressed Applegate once more: “Mr Applegate, we can certainly understand your pain and worries and will of course leave immediately if you wish. However, I would like to recommend, based on my long experience as a detective, that you take action right now in order to find your daughter as soon as possible. The more time is allowed to pass in such a case, the more the initially fresh traces and clues become blurred and it will be more difficult to find the missing person.”

The First Investigator paused briefly to assess the effect of his words on Mr Applegate. And indeed, the man looked at him thoughtfully and then let himself sink slowly back into his chair.

Jupiter insistently continued: “It is certainly advisable to involve the police immediately. And if you want to, then we will also make enquiries. As we have told you, we run a small detective agency and we would do everything in our abilities to find your daughter!”

Pete and Bob, who had also got up in the meantime, nodded emphatically and murmured their approval. Full of expectation, The Three Investigators looked at Applegate, who was sitting motionless in his armchair. But he seemed to at least let Jupiter’s suggestions go through his head. He no longer just stared apathetically, but blinked restlessly, bit his lips and then wiped his eyes with his hand.

Finally he gave a deep sigh and said: “Well, okay, what do you suggest that I do?”

Immediately The Three Investigators sat down again and Jupiter took the floor: “First of all, you should tell us everything you know, but most of all why Julia could get the idea that

her brother is still alive and even send her a message. Then we call the police and inform Inspector Cotta of the Rocky Beach Police Department. He knows us well and we have often worked with him. And finally, we'd like to see Julia's room. Perhaps there's a trace of that ominous message there that we can follow up on."

Applegate nodded and took a deep breath. It was obvious that it was not easy for him to talk about what The Three Investigators wanted to know from him. The three boys, however, could only roughly gauge how deep the wounds that fate had torn into Applegate's soul four weeks ago. And they had not even begun to heal, when the next misfortune already came upon him with all its might.

In a toneless voice, looking into an indefinite distance, the man finally began to tell: "My son Ted died, as I said, in a car accident four weeks ago. His car plunged over the cliffs south of Santa Barbara. It is said that he crashed through the barriers in a tight bend, as if the road there went straight on. What exactly happened, however, is still unclear today. There were no eyewitnesses, no indication of foul play, nothing. Not even Ted's body was found, only the wreckage of his car, completely destroyed." Applegate paused briefly and shook his head in bewilderment. It was apparently still impossible for him to understand how this terrible accident could have happened in the first place.

Slowly, he continued: "Julia was completely devastated. Oh, what am I saying! She was... it tore her heart out! She was so desperate that she couldn't even cry over the death of her brother. She loved Ted so much, she couldn't even cry over his death.

"Maybe, I often thought, maybe he was something like a... well, like a mother to her... like the mother she never had... because Gladys, that was my wife, died giving birth to Julia."

The Three Investigators just sat there paralyzed and listened to the grief-stricken man full of consternation. The suffering that Applegate had to endure almost exceeded their imagination. They already knew about Julia's mother, but in a span of four weeks, the man's son and perhaps also his daughter had been taken away from him. Could a person even get through this?

"Julia didn't speak a word for a week at first," Applegate continued. "Not with me, not with her best friend Chloe, not with anyone. Then suddenly, from one minute to the next, she seemed different. She started talking again, went back to school, and seemed to be in high spirits. The good mood she was suddenly in seemed almost a little defiant and I asked her what had happened. And then I found out..."

Applegate paused briefly and swallowed. The Three Investigators stared at him spellbound.

"Julia did not believe in the death of her brother," he said and there was something like bewilderment in his voice. "She simply refused to face the terrible facts. Julia said he was probably just out of town, and he would come back soon. She asked daily if he had called, often checked her computer hourly to see if he had sent her an e-mail. The two of them..." Applegate looked up briefly and smiled faintly as he remembered. "You must know, they sent each other e-mails almost every day. They made a game out of it—encrypted messages, invented new codes... Julia is very adept at this sort of thing. At first..." Applegate's face darkened again when he returned to the present. "At first I ignored it all... but little by little, I tried to bring the horrible truth closer to Julia. But she resisted, contradicted me, and even laughed at me."

Jupiter, Pete and Bob were still silent. None of them wanted to interrupt Mr Applegate. Besides, all three of them were not in the mood for questions. They had to digest what they had heard.

"And then yesterday, she came downstairs and shouted that Ted had finally e-mailed her!" Applegate gave a sigh that expressed all the desperate helplessness into which his daughter's madness had plunged him. "I don't know but somehow, I just couldn't go on. I should have been more understanding. I know, but I was finished! I told her that she had to stop imagining things—that she had to finally understand that Ted was dead. And then, then I sent her to her room." Again, Applegate buried his face in his hands. Exhausted, he let himself fall backwards onto the armchair.

For a minute, nobody said anything. A muffled, leaden silence crept through the room.

Finally, Jupiter looked at Pete and Bob and slowly rose. "I'll call Cotta right away," he said uncertainly facing his two friends. Then he went to the phone, picked it up and dialled the number of the Rocky Beach Police Department.

"Um, Mr Applegate..." Bob cleared his throat. "Mr Applegate, could you please tell us where Julia's room is? We'd like to look around there."

"Sure," Applegate said hoarsely and stood up. "Come on, I'll show you."

Bob and Pete followed Julia's father out into the hallway. Jupiter had just hung up the phone and joined them. While going up to the first floor, Jupiter informed Mr Applegate that he had reported to the Rocky Beach police and Inspector Cotta would send his men out here to get more details from Mr Applegate. In the meantime, it was better that Mr Applegate remained at home in case there are new developments.

Julia's room was a typical girl's room, or rather, The Three Investigators imagined it to be a typical girl's room. All kinds of odds and ends were lying around everywhere. Every little space offered room for a cute figurine, a cute cuddly toy, a colourful scented candle or some other dust collector. On the walls were countless posters of boy bands, with their band members in all sorts of poses—one of the singers even adorned the duvet cover. Her desk looked as if a stationery store had dumped its entire stock on it.

On one end of the desk, next to the mess, was a huge computer monitor. Jupiter was even more amazed when he saw the computer case in the table below. "This is a brand-new model! The fastest and the best that is currently available! Wow!"

Applegate walked towards the computer and stroked over its case. "Julia is crazy about this box," he said and looked longingly at the monitor as if the picture of his daughter was about to appear. "It has to do with Ted too. I for one can't do much with these things. But Ted has been playing around with computers since he was a little boy, so it was only a matter of time before Julia discovered her passion for them. And after he started working as a salesman in a computer store a year ago, he would always supply Julia with all sorts of computer components. He said he could get them very cheap—almost for free. This machine here..." Applegate knocked gently on the monitor, "he only brought it just before his accident."

Jupe sat down on the chair in front of the computer table. "Julia said yesterday that she had received an e-mail from her brother. I think we should take a closer look at her e-mail program... May I?" he asked Applegate as he put his finger on the power button.

"Yeah, yeah, go ahead," Applegate nodded resignedly, "but I can't imagine there could be anything of interest in there, let alone a message from Ted."

Jupiter pressed the power button and let the computer boot up. As the computer screen slowly brightened, Bob turned to Julia's father and said: "Mr Applegate, you said that Ted worked in a computer store?"

"Yeah, some shop in downtown Rocky Beach," the man said. "I have never been there. Ted didn't want me to drop by either. I always got the impression that he was a little ashamed of what he did."

"And he didn't live here either, I suppose, since he was exchanging regular e-mails with Julia?" Bob asked.

"He had a small apartment on Brewburry Road," Mr Applegate said. "He moved there about four years ago when—"

"Excuse me, Mr Applegate, for interrupting you," Jupiter suddenly said, "but can you remember the exact time that Julia told you when she received a message from her brother?"

Like Pete and Bob, Applegate looked at the monitor where Jupiter had meanwhile called up the e-mail program. In a long row, there was a box containing the messages received recently.

"Um, that must have been..." thought Applegate, "that must have been about half past three in the afternoon... Why?"

Jupiter pointed to the screen. "Because Julia received only one e-mail yesterday, at exactly 3:25 pm."

Applegate and the other two investigators read with suspense what was written in the line that Jupiter's fingers were following on the monitor. But apart from a sender unknown to them and the exact date and time of the e-mail, they found nothing there.

"No subject?" frowned Pete.

"Come on, Jupe, open the e-mail," Bob urged.

Jupiter nodded intently and then opened the message... but what they saw was a blank.

"There's an attachment, Jupe. Look!" Pete cried excitedly and pointed to the bottom of the e-mail.

Jupiter moved the arrow of the mouse to attachment button and clicked it. The computer launched a new program, and then in a fraction of a second, displayed an image onto the monitor. The Three Investigators' breath stopped.

The picture was so frightening and horribly realistic that the three boys had the feeling of being face to face with a beast.

5. Tracing the E-Mail

“Oh my gosh!” Pete gasped and instinctively backed away. “A hideous snake!”

“A cobra, a king cobra,” Jupiter replied and stared at the image of a huge snake that literally jumped out of the monitor.

Standing high up to attack, it had bronze sparkling eyes, razor-sharp fangs and drool dripping from its mouth. It appeared so aggressive and dangerous that blood could freeze in the one’s veins by just looking at it. The artist had designed the beast down to the smallest detail that one could almost feel the hot breath flowing from the snake’s throat.

“Holy cow! You better not get too close to a beast like that!” Bob pursed his lips and made a low whistle.

“This is the typical threatening posture of the king cobra,” Jupiter grabbed his chin and leaned back a little. “When disturbed, the cobra rises up on the forward portion of its body and flattens its neck, spreading out the skin on its neck ribs to create what appears to be a hood. Cobra venom generally contains neurotoxins, which—”

“—Is very poisonous,” Bob interrupted his friend and gave him a reproachful look. Jupiter sometimes lacked the necessary tact when he was allowed to show off his immense knowledge.

“Mr Applegate,” Bob went on, because Julia’s father was looking at them with astonishment from one investigator to the next. “What amazes me most about this horrible snake at the moment is that anyone would even e-mail Julia a picture like that.” Bob looked at Applegate questioningly. “Or was Julia an avid snake fan or a fan of particularly… well, frightening and shocking images, so perhaps some other lover of such images may have sent her this message?”

Applegate shook his head. “Not that I know of.”

“I thought so,” Bob replied, “and that’s why I find it strange that she was sent this gruesome picture.”

“And even stranger,” said Pete, “that this picture could have made her think that her brother had e-mailed it to her.”

Everyone looked at each other helplessly and then thoughtfully contemplated the frightening threat of the cobra.

Jupiter slowly let his fingers wander to his lower lip and then began to pinch it extensively. This was one of his quirks and at the same time an unmistakable sign that he was starting to work his grey cells. “Maybe there’s something in the picture that we haven’t discovered yet,” he said and moved a little closer to the screen.

But there was nothing. There were no signs or letters of any kind hidden in the image. Even when Jupiter loaded the cobra into an image editing program and used the zoom function to look at it, they found nothing, although they could now even see the individual pixels of the image document.

“Why don’t you take a look at the plain text version of the e-mail and check the header for the sender’s address,” Bob asked. “Maybe it will tell us something after all.”

Jupiter went back to the window with the e-mail program and then opened a menu that showed the header.

“‘Applejuice@califox.com’,” Pete read aloud. “That means nothing to me.”

“This is the recipient’s address—Julia’s address,” Bob informed him and pointed to the screen. “This is the sender: ‘Snakehunter@california.com’.” Bob thought for a moment and then asked: “Does ‘Snakehunter’ mean anything to you?”

“Snakehunter?” Pete pulled the corners of his mouth down and shook his head. “I have no idea. I certainly don’t know anyone with such an odd hobby.”

“Perhaps this address will tell us something?” Bob suggested.

“Or lead us astray,” Jupiter interjected, then turned to Applegate, who had so far silently followed the boys’ efforts. “Mr Applegate, does this e-mail address look familiar to you?”

But even here, the man had to pass. “I have never interfered with Julia’s e-mail correspondences and, as I said, I am hardly familiar with these things either. And I told you that Julia liked to encrypt her messages and she always got e-mails sent to her in some kind of code. She once showed me an e-mail from Ted, which consisted of lots of little teddy bears. Then she typed something on the keyboard and suddenly a message appeared. Julia loves such games.” A brief smile flitted across Applegate’s face. But immediately reality caught up with him and he looked down all the more sadly.

The Three Investigators looked at the man with regret and then turned back to the computer. “As long as we don’t know who this message is from, we won’t get any further,” Jupiter murmured to himself. “Perhaps the cobra contains a secret message, perhaps not. And maybe it’s all a bad joke and has nothing to do with Julia’s disappearance.”

“What if we just reply to the sender and ask who he is?” Bob pursed his lips and raised his shoulders.

“This can work, but would be a great coincidence,” said Jupiter. “However, I think I know how we can find out where this e-mail came from.”

The First Investigator pondered for a moment, then nodded wordlessly and grabbed the keyboard. With a few commands, he composed a new e-mail, attached the cobra e-mail and sent the whole thing off.

“To his new guru,” Pete said to Bob with a wink in his eyes.

“Right!” replied Jupiter. “I sent an e-mail to Mikey... because I’m sure he has the know-how and the necessary resources to trace where our snake friend sent his message from—probably from the IP address.”

“I see it exactly the same way,” Pete confirmed with played arrogance and stuck his thumb up. “The IP address, of course. Who’d never heard of it, right?” Sometimes Pete had the impression that where there was modesty in most people, for Jupiter, it was just a big hole.

Jupiter, who was fully aware of what was bothering Pete, sighed emphatically but did not let himself be carried away to give a reply. He knew that time was better spent than to engage in verbal skirmishes.

“Now what?” Bob asked, to ease the situation.

“Let’s wait,” Jupiter said.

Bob frowned. “But this could take forever!”

“Do you have a better suggestion?” Jupe asked.

Bob grunted something incomprehensible and looked around for a place where it was comfortable to wait, while Pete simply sat down on the floor, Applegate looked around a little helplessly at first and then asked: “Uh, can I bring you... something? Anything? Maybe a drink? Or food?”

“Nothing for me, thanks,” Pete replied.

“No thanks,” Bob shook his head.

However, for Jupiter the little word ‘food’ had caused the release of a huge gush of gastric juice. This stimulus in turn activated some nerve receptors, which now screamed the word ‘hungry’ loudly to his brain, whereupon Jupiter’s mouth slowly opened and released the words: “Well, if you—”

“Jupe, remember that you are on a diet!” Pete strangled his friend. As the sports ace of The Three Investigators, he sometimes felt obliged to keep an eye on Jupiter’s weight as well. Although, in Pete’s opinion, the word ‘weight’ could not be used in Jupiter’s case. He thought that ‘dead-weight tonnage’ was more appropriate.

“I am—” Jupiter was about to reply to Pete, when the computer gave a short notification tone.

“An incoming e-mail?” Bob marvelled. “An e-mail’s coming in? Already?”

“Looks like it,” Jupiter confirmed and opened the message. He briefly skimmed the beginning of the message and then excitedly called out: “Indeed! Mikey has done it! Great!”

“Really? Read it!” urged Pete, who had suddenly completely forgotten about his thoughts about Jupiter’s weight.

Jupiter cleared his throat and read aloud: “Hello Jupiter, the computer from which the e-mail was sent is located at an Internet café ‘Surfers Paradise’. Mikey.”

“An Internet café?” Pete stared at the screen in bewilderment. “This came from an Internet café?”

“Yes, and Mikey has even given me the exact address of this café here...” he said, pointing to the end of the e-mail. “Surfers Paradise is at 35 Sea Drive, Santa Monica. The owner is David Meyers.”

Pete turned up his nose sceptically. “Well, but if someone sent the e-mail from there, then we’re not smarter than we were before.”

“At least, this is a first lead! Let’s go!” cried Jupiter, who had now caught fire.

The First Investigator jumped up from his chair with determination and nodded at his two friends with a challenge. “What are you waiting for? We’re going on a trip to Surfers Paradise!”

6. Wheels Clamped

After receiving Mikey's e-mail, The Three Investigators rode their bikes from Applegate's house directly to Pete's house, because he lived closest. There they got into his MG and went on their way to Santa Monica.

Pete slowly steered his MG to Sea Drive in Santa Monica.

"Here! There it is," Bob suddenly shouted, pointing from the right-hand side window. "Surfers Paradise, that yellow thatched-roof building right there on the beach."

Pete looked at the building and then along the road. "But I can't park here," he noted with a glance at the countless 'No Stopping' signs that adorned the busy beach promenade at regular intervals. He then drove around the building to a narrow back lane.

"Why don't you just park over there at the loading bay," Bob said and pointed ahead.

"That's equally bad," Pete remarked. "I still can't park there!"

"Oh, come on, don't be like that," Bob waved. "Nobody checks at this time of the day. Here, pull into the loading bay."

Pete was a bit queasy, but he didn't feel like searching for a car park space for half an eternity and maybe even having to pay a small fortune for it. Moreover, he did not expect that they would have to stay too long in the café—a few questions, and then that should be it. With a slight steering angle, the Second Investigator directed the MG off the lane and let it roll into the loading bay.

"Here we go," Jupiter said and lifted himself off the passenger seat. Behind him, Bob climbed out of the back seat and Pete was the last to get out and then locked his car. With an uncertain look up and down the lane, he finally turned around and followed his two friends.

Surfers Paradise turned out to be an Internet café whose interior design cleverly played with the double meaning of the name. There were many computers on individual tables, but at the moment only a handful of people were sitting in front of them, staring intently at their monitors or busily working on the keyboards. Besides that, there were decorative items everywhere that had to do with surfing in one way or another—a few surfboards were hanging from the ceiling, a mannequin in a wetsuit was posing on a wall and dozens of photographs showed some surf champions in action. Even the man behind the counter, with his long blond hair and sun-tanned face, looked as if he had just emerged from the waves.

"Well, what can I do for you?" He came up to The Three Investigators with a big smile. Bob would have liked to put his hand in front of his eyes as he was so blinded by the white teeth with which the beach boy beamed at them.

"Yes, good day," replied Jupiter, who was not quite comfortable in his skin. "Are you Mr Meyers?"

"In all his glory!" the man laughed and held out his muscular paw to Jupiter. "David Meyers... but call me Dave." The iron grip drove Jupiter to tears.

"I am Jupiter Jones, and this is Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews." Meyers also squeezed the hands of the other two investigators, and Jupiter thought he could hear his bones crunching as he pulled one of their business cards out of his pocket and handed it to the man.

"We are investigating a case..." Jupiter pointed to the card, "involving a strange e-mail. After some checking, we found out that it was, uh, sent from this café, and we were hoping

that you might be able to help us.” The First Investigator blinked uncertainly because what Mikey had done for them was not entirely legal. And someone who dealt with e-mails on a daily basis, like this Mr Meyers, would at best find it suspicious that they had been able to trace the sender of an e-mail.

But Meyers didn’t seem to care. “Oh, you’re investigators? That’s interesting,” he said curiously. “You know, I’m a total mystery buff! What’s your case about? Was someone—” Meyers ran a finger down his throat and looked at Jupiter with a tense expression.

The First Investigator suppressed a smile. “No, no, Mr Meyers—”

“Dave!”

“Uh, Dave. It’s not even really clear what’s behind this. At the moment, we only have an e-mail from a certain ‘Snakehunter’ as a clue, with a cobra picture attached, and in this context it would be very helpful for us to know who sent the said message from your café. Can you help us out?”

Meyers blinked somewhat disturbed and sorted Jupiter’s request in his head so that he understood it at least halfway. Then he said: “You mean, you want to know who sent an e-mail from here?”

“Exactly,” nodded Jupiter.

“I’m sorry,” Meyers replied astounded, “but I can’t possibly remember every single customer who uses the computers here. In fact, I barely know my regular customers. They come in, pay, use the computer, and then they leave.”

The Three Investigators looked at each other at a loss. Now what?

“Perhaps, the only thing I could find out...” Meyers suddenly murmured. “Do you mean that that e-mail was sent from my IP address?”

“Yes,” Jupe replied. “That’s why we are here.”

Then Meyers fell silent, frowned thoughtfully. “In that case, I might be able to check the network activity records and see which terminals were in use by customers to send e-mails at that date and time.”

He disappeared behind his counter, and looked at a monitor for a moment and typed something into a keyboard.

“Okay, when was that e-mail sent? Give me the date and approximate time,” Meyers asked, and Jupe gave him the requested information.

“Yes, it could be terminal number 19!” he suddenly said and then came back smiling to the three boys. “From the time you gave me, my records show that e-mails were only sent out from one terminal.”

The man led The Three Investigators past a few tables and then stopped in front of a terminal that was empty at the moment. The screen was currently only covered by the waves of the screen saver.

“Okay, I can only tell that it was sent from this terminal,” Meyers said. “Once a customer logs out, the cache is deleted and everything is reverted back to the default. In that sense, I think we cannot trace anything from this computer itself.”

Dave Meyers seemed to know what he was talking about. The Three Investigators fell silent again, wondering what could be done.

“And I don’t suppose you remember who was sitting here yesterday afternoon?” Bob asked after a pause.

The man shook his head. “I haven’t the faintest idea. Yesterday there was a lot going on here, you know, and I was glad to be able to keep track of things. I couldn’t focus on any one customer in particular.”

“But is there anything unusual for you?” Jupiter asked.

"Oh, yeah," Meyers replied. "There's this one thing I can tell you... From my records, the customer sent about 50 or 60 e-mails out. However, I wouldn't be able to tell who he sent those e-mails to."

"Really?" Pete remarked. "50 to 60 e-mails!"

"I can also deduce from the time the e-mails were sent, it was a single e-mail sent to multiple recipients," Meyers added.

Bob curled his nose thoughtfully and said: "But what was that all about? Why is someone sending the same e-mail to so many people?"

"That I cannot tell," Meyers suggested. "Maybe some new marketing gag?"

The Three Investigators were not exactly satisfied with outcome of their visit, but they were thankful that Dave Meyers was helpful. They thanked him and left the Internet café.

They walked around the shop to the back lane when Pete suddenly stopped and stared confusedly at his MG. Its left front tyre was decorated with a beautiful, yellow-red wheel clamp with the unmistakable inscription: 'Santa Monica Police Department'.

7. Stego

“No checks at this time of the day, huh?” Pete threw the receipt for the parking ticket he’d just paid at the Santa Monica Police Department on the dashboard of his MG and let himself fall behind the wheel, unnerved. Angrily, he looked at the two policemen leaving after they had removed the wheel clamp.

Bob and Jupe also got in. Bob made a rather contrite face because it was he who had announced with conviction that the authorities would not check for parking infringements. And the result of this was not only a hefty parking ticket, which had torn a huge hole in the notoriously empty coffers of The Three Investigators, but also a long walk through Santa Monica’s streets, and two hours at the police department to endure lots of stupid remarks from the officers. It was early in the evening when The Three Investigators set off again towards Rocky Beach.

“I’ll make it up to you,” Bob whimpered and cast a cautious sideways glance at his two friends.

But Pete still didn’t talk to him, and Jupiter kneaded his tortured feet with a grim expression. The distance the First Investigator walked today was further than he would run in a whole month.

Bob pondered for a moment and then took another run at it. “At the next opportunity, I’ll work for Aunt Mathilda for a day and use it to replenish our common fund. How about that?”

Pete whistled softly through his teeth and Jupiter let go of his feet.

“You would do that?” Pete finally asked.

“Hmm,” nodded Bob.

Pete turned briefly to look at Jupiter in the passenger seat, registered his surprised wink and then said: “Okay, then we’re even!”

After a day’s work for Jupiter’s aunt at The Jones Salvage Yard, he would feel every bone one by one, especially since Aunt Mathilda was not exactly known to restrain from slaving the boys away. But for that, Bob had at least calmed down his two friends, and that was worth it in any case.

Pete pulled out of the disastrous loading bay full of verve, and Jupiter felt good about Bob’s offer and in anticipation of a day off from work, he began to think about the events in Surfers Paradise. This means that he now no longer kneaded his feet but pinched his lower lip.

“Somehow I suspect,” Jupe murmured worriedly, “that Julia’s disappearance is connected with this!”

“What do you mean?” Bob asked.

“I think she’s been kidnapped!”

“But how did you—”

Jupiter interrupted Bob. “As I said, it’s a feeling I can’t explain. But somehow this is all —” Jupiter paused and suddenly said as if following an inner inspiration: “Let’s go to the Applegates once more. Let’s check the first e-mail again... Maybe we missed something.”

Bob couldn’t go. He had promised his mother that he would be home for dinner because they had a visitor today—some great-uncle of his came.

Pete dropped Bob off at home, and Jupiter asked him to check something out by tomorrow. Bob was responsible for records and research and had good opportunities to track down all kinds of information thanks to his former part-time job at the Rocky Beach library and to his father, who worked at the *Los Angeles Times*.

And this time, Jupe wanted him to gather all information about Ted Applegate by tomorrow—in particular, who he was, where he lived and worked, what had happened to him in his accident and so on.

“I will, Jupe,” Bob said, tapped himself on the forehead as a goodbye and then slammed the door. He watched his two friends turn around the next bend and then went into his house.

Mr Applegate was far from surprised that Jupiter and Pete turned up at his house again. He even gave the impression that he had been waiting for them and pulled them into the house immediately after they had rung the bell.

But Jupiter and Pete had to disappoint him. They had no news about Julia, and when Jupiter had told him about the events in Santa Monica, deep worry lines dug into the man’s forehead again. In the meantime, Mr Applegate informed the two boys that the police had come and taken details from him about Julia. Now he could only wait.

Pete then tried to spread some optimism. “Maybe we missed something in the first e-mail, Mr Applegate. Could we take another look at Julia’s computer?”

But Pete’s attempt remained what it was, because Applegate nodded weakly and said soundlessly: “Sure, boys. Go on up, you know the way.” With his head bowed, he then turned and crept back into the living room, where he dropped onto the sofa with a heavy sigh. Jupiter and Pete glanced at each other a little more and then ran up to Julia’s room.

“Here we go,” Jupiter said to Pete and started up the computer. “Let’s examine the picture again, down to the last pixel.”

“Yes!” Pete replied enterprisingly and pulled up a chair.

But all they had achieved after half an hour of intensive observation, enlargement of the image, contrast sharpening, reflection, colour change and so on, was that their eyes burned and their heads ached. There was not even the slightest indication that the e-mail contained anything other than the image of a frightening cobra.

“There’s nothing here,” Jupiter moaned.

“Looks like it,” Pete agreed with him. “Looks like it’s just any picture.”

Jupe suddenly hit the computer table with his fist. “There must be something,” he pressed out between his teeth. “I have been in the—” The First Investigator paused abruptly. “Perhaps I’d better check what else is in her computer. Might just get some clues from there.”

Jupiter closed the image editing program and looked at the list of programs. The other software packages included the usual office suite—word processor, spreadsheet, and the like, audio-video player, web browser, system utilities, some games, and... suddenly, Jupiter got excited. “Well! Well!” he cried. “What’s this? ‘Stego Lab’! That’s it!”

“Jupe, what is it?” Pete asked anxiously.

“Stego!” breathed Jupiter.

“Uh, what?” Pete looked into his friend’s eyes, but Jupiter’s gaze remained fixed on the monitor as if the secret of all secrets was revealed to him there.

“Stego!” Jupiter repeated more clearly now and tapped on the monitor. “Here it is! She’s using stego! The cobra is a stego image!”

Now Pete was getting confused. What was his friend babbling about? Was this just another one of Jupiter’s flashes of inspiration or was he on the verge of going nuts? Did his

friend overwhelmed his intelligence and tip over into madness? Anyway, Pete had once read that ingenuity and madness were very close to each other. He had to say something: “I don’t understand a word you’re saying! I want to hear it again, slowly, in a version for normal mortals.”

Jupiter looked at Pete irritatedly. Then he nodded, took a deep breath and started again: “We are getting closer to the solution, Pete! … Here! This has to be it.” Jupiter pulled his friend forward and turned his head so that he had to look at the monitor. “This software on Julia’s computer is called ‘Stego Lab’. ‘Stego’ is the common abbreviation for ‘steganography’.”

“Steganography? That funny shorthand with the curls and the check marks?” Pete remarked.

“Not shorthand! Shorthand is ‘stenography’. I’m talking about ‘steganography’! The word comes from the Greek and means something like ‘concealed writing’. Steganography is a system for concealing messages within another file.”

“You mean like that crypto… crypto thing?” Pete asked.

“You mean cryptography,” Jupiter explained. “There is a difference. In cryptography, you can tell that a message has been encrypted, but you cannot decode the message without knowing the proper key. In steganography, most people will not be able to detect the presence of the message! In fact, people who are not the intended recipients of the message will not even suspect that a hidden message exists.”

“You mean that the cobra image is carrying a message and we cannot detect it?” Pete asked.

“Yes,” Jupe affirmed. “I’m sure of it, simply because software such as what Julia has here—‘Stego Lab’—is not a common software on a typical computer. She has this installed because she uses it to decrypt stego images.”

“So how does this stego work?” Pete wanted to know.

“The stego software conceals a file, message, image, or video within another file, message, image, or video,” Jupiter continued the explanation. “You need to have a password known as a stego key in the concealing process. The resultant image with encoded secret information is referred to as a stego image.”

Pete looked sceptically at Jupiter. “So her brother sent her a message that is concealed in the cobra image.”

The First Investigator knew immediately what Pete was getting at and thought for a moment. “Since Julia and Ted, according to their father, always sent each other encrypted e-mails, I’m sure that the cobra image carries an encoded secret message. The problem is that we do not have the password to decrypt it. If we have the password, then we can use the stego software to reveal the message.”

“You mean…” Pete felt the colour draining from his face. “You mean a… a dead man sent Julia a message?”

Jupiter replied nothing at first. Only after a few seconds, he shrugged his shoulders and said: “Let’s see if stego software here can get us something.”

Pete was anything but happy about this answer. Actually, he had hoped that Jupiter would laugh out loud, indignantly point out to him that deceased people cannot send e-mails or explain that the whole thing rationally in some other way. But nothing of the sort had happened. Pete swallowed his queasy feeling and looked at the monitor.

“We need the password first,” Jupiter said. “Only with the password can we reveal the message.”

“And how are you going to get that password?” Pete looked at Jupiter expectantly.

"I don't know." Jupiter hinted at a faint smile, but Pete understood immediately that they were facing a real hurdle. How would they ever come up with any password that a girl almost completely unknown to them used to conceal and reveal messages? Pete grinned back artificially and felt something like relief. The question whether the e-mail came from the afterlife would probably never be answered.

But Jupiter left no stone unturned. Stubbornly and with all his mental powers, he entered one possible password after the other into the keyboard. He combined letters from Julia's and Ted's names, tried out numbers from their birthdays, which he had asked Mr Applegate for, went through the names of various pop stars on the wall posters, but nothing was right. He didn't manage to guess the correct password. Pete also contributed a few more possibilities, but didn't get a hit either.

"Come Jupe, let it go," he said after a while and patted Jupiter on the shoulder. "It's like the famous needle in a haystack, forget it. Besides, I have to get home. It's almost eight."

But Jupiter stubbornly shook his head as agitated as he was and started to pinch his lip.

"Look," Pete insisted. "The password doesn't have to mean anything. Maybe she just invented the letters, scrawled around thoughtlessly, as you sometimes do."

Dejected, Jupiter went back to the e-mail program and forwarded the cobra e-mail with the image attachment to their e-mail address. He intended to keep a copy of it so that he could work on it later.

With that, they left the Applegate house and returned home.

8. ‘Teddybyte’

“I don’t understand that,” Bob said, irritated.

The Three Investigators had met the next day around noon at Headquarters, where Jupiter and Pete had just told Bob all about the events from the previous evening. But Bob could do very little with it. He was clear about the stego software, but then there was a password, and his two friends had tried numerous guesses without success.

“Well,” Jupiter finally broke the silence. “Perhaps we have to put the stego image aside for the moment. Maybe you should tell us what you’ve got, Bob.”

“Hmm...” Bob said and then took a note from his jacket pocket. “I found something interesting there,” he began, looking at the piece of paper. “I was supposed to find out everything I could about Ted Applegate. As I was sitting at my dad’s office this morning on the PC and typing the name into a search engine, one of his colleagues suddenly tapped me on the shoulder. I think his name is Bruce Baxter or something and in the course of the conversation he turned out to be quite a computer nerd. Well, he had read the name by chance and asked me with interest what it was all about. So I told him what I was doing and what I was looking for. He got more and more interested, and when I finished telling him, he confided in me some most amazing things.”

Jupiter and Pete looked at their friend attentively.

Bob took a breath and continued: “Ted Applegate is not a salesman in a computer store, as what his father had told us. Probably his father might not know any better. In professional circles, his son has earned the nickname ‘Teddybyte’ and he is considered one of the top programmers in the country!”

Jupiter’s mouth remained open. “What are you saying?” he finally said. “Ted Applegate is a top programmer?”

“Yes, you heard it right,” Bob assured him. “Ted’s services were highly sought after and, I believe, he is very highly paid. According to Bruce, the most cunning head-hunters in the computer industry were after him like the devil after his soul to lure him to their respective companies.”

“But why did he tell his father that he worked in a computer store and lived in a small, crummy apartment in Rocky Beach when he could afford a beach villa with all the frills,” Pete asked confusedly.

“That’s what I asked Bruce and he didn’t know,” Bob said. “But he had heard from hearsay that Ted didn’t care about money at all and that despite his success, he had remained a simple, nice young man. An apartment was probably just enough for him, so he didn’t need any fanciful house.”

“Perhaps he told his father about the computer store for the sake of simplicity, because he probably wouldn’t have understood if Ted had tried to explain to him what he does every day as a programmer,” Jupiter suspected. “Looking at it from another point of view, he might well be involved in something secretive or even illegal.”

“Maybe,” Bob replied, “at least Ted was really some kind of genius, Bruce said. But the thing about the accident is true, as Applegate told us. According to the licence plate, it was

Ted's car that crashed into the sea south of Santa Barbara four weeks ago. But all they found was the car with no body."

"Hmm," Jupiter mumbled, pinching his lower lip vigorously. Suddenly, he jumped up and cried: "Wait a minute! Wait a minute! What was Ted's nickname that you mentioned earlier?"

"'Teddybyte'" Bob repeated.

"That could be the password that he used for his stego images!" Jupiter shouted. "There is no harm trying it out!"

Very quickly, he turned on the computer. Then he searched for the 'Stego Lab' software on the Internet, downloaded and installed it. Luckily the software was available for free. Then he launched their e-mail program and downloaded the cobra image into their hard disk.

The three of them took a deep breath as Jupiter launched the 'Stego Lab' software and loaded in the cobra image. The software prompted for the password and he entered 'Teddybyte'. It took only about a second for the software to display... a concealed message!

"Got it!" Jupiter shouted out in jubilation, as his two friends also broke out in cheers. They are back on track again.

Jupiter then read the message out:

Hi Juju!

Don't be alarmed, but it's me, Teddy. I'm not dead, and right now, I'm fine. But I'm in great danger and I need your help! Meet me at our old meeting place Ω 5-15 tomorrow at noon, and bring The Three Investigators with you! You'll find them at The Jones Salvage Yard.

Please do not inform the police under any circumstances, because they think I am dead and you are crazy if you explain to them that you have received an e-mail from me! So Juju, get the three boys. They'll help you and me for sure! I'll see you tomorrow. You'll find out everything.

Your Teddy Bear.

The three of them stared at the monitor in disbelief.

"This... this is a joke, right?" Bob asked.

"I don't think so," Jupiter said seriously. "We found other stego pictures in Julia's e-mail folder that her brother sent her before he was supposed to have died. It would be a coincidence if this coded cobra picture had come from someone else."

"So are you going to tell Mr Applegate about this message?" Bob now literally glued to Jupiter's lips.

Jupiter fell silent for a minute, thinking hard. Finally he said: "Perhaps we shouldn't disturb the man by telling him that his dead son is now actually writing e-mails... First, let's find out what's going on."

Pete didn't want to say anything about this. He had been dreaming all night about some zombies sitting in front of their laptops, sending e-mails. Although he was sure that there were things between heaven and earth for which there were no logical explanations, he did not want to get into a discussion with Jupiter, in which he would, as always, lose out. But at some point, Jupiter would realize that logic and realism were not everything, and perhaps even in this case, when it became clear who had sent Julia the e-mail with the cobra...

"So what does this funny 'Ω 5-15' mean?" Bob asked.

Jupiter shook his head. “Omega is a letter from the Greek alphabet. But at this moment, I don’t know what ‘Ω 5-15’ means. This is just another one of those codes created by Ted and Julia—this time for the meeting place.

“Maybe we should pay a visit to Cotta and see what the police have uncovered. Somehow I have the feeling that we are on the trail of a very big thing here!”

9. ‘Ω 5-15’

“Guys, slow down! The police are on it, but at this moment, I can’t find anything unusual or mysterious about what happened.” Inspector Cotta drove through his hair, which was already slightly greying at the sides, and leaned back in his leather armchair. Behind him on the wall hung a yellowed poster, from which a mysterious and somewhat entranced Humphrey Bogart looked down on the three boys. He, too, did not seem to show much understanding for the case.

“But Inspector!” protested Jupiter. “It is obvious that something is wrong here! The picture to Julia Applegate was concealed with a password that only—”

“Jupiter, look, let me show you something!” Cotta made a quarter of a turn to the right, where his computer was, and opened his e-mail program with the mouse. Then he clicked on a link and suddenly, what appeared on the screen was... the same cobra image! The Three Investigators startled almost simultaneously and were completely baffled.

“Look...” Cotta said, smiling somewhat pitifully. “I’m afraid there might not be too much of a secret in this whole affair because this picture was even mailed to the Chief of Police himself, along with a dozen other public authorities. And I’m sure that the same message will appear to all recipients when you enter the password. This is all a bad joke, nothing more. If Ted Applegate asks his sister not to call the police, then why did he sent this e-mail to so many people?”

“Inspector Cotta, this—” Bob began.

“And then,” the inspector interrupted, “there is the small but significant detail that Ted Applegate has been dead for four weeks!”

“But, his body was—” Pete began.

“—Not found, yes, yes,” the inspector interrupted again. “And you think that if Applegate had survived the accident, he would have calmly read his obituaries and said to himself: ‘Well, Teddy, old boy, now nobody will believe you’re alive anyway, so start a new life somewhere. Father and sister will get back together again in their grief?’ Do you believe that? No, guys, Ted Applegate is dead!”

Jupiter made one last attempt: “And who then—”

Cotta sighed impatiently and looked at the three boys ungraciously. “Don’t be angry with me, but I still have a lot to do today. Unfortunately there are some very lively criminals in this city, and I just don’t have the time to deal with dead people. So if it’s not too much trouble...” With a glance to the door, the inspector underlined his request and the three boys rose discontentedly.

The three of them mumbled a bad-tempered ‘goodbye’ and then left the office.

“That was very helpful,” Jupiter complained when they were standing outside on the street again.

“And so kind,” Pete whispered and made a scornful grimace.

“Now what?” Bob asked. “What do we do?”

Jupiter pulled his shoulders up, moved his right hand upwards and pinched his lips decisively. “We are on our own again,” he said. “But we can do it without Cotta and the Rocky Beach police!”

“And where will we begin our search?” Pete replied defiantly. “Should we hold spiritualistic sessions and contact the afterlife? Or should we let the cards be dealt? A glass ball isn’t bad either!”

“Save your sarcasm and think instead!” Jupiter retorted. “Is there a lead we can follow? Something we haven’t checked yet?”

The Three Investigators sank into thoughtful silence while standing on the side walk for a few minutes. Each of them went through all the details that came to their minds about the whole story about Julia and Ted Applegate.

Eventually the three boys started walking along the side walk, talking softly to each other.

“The meeting place!” Bob suddenly blurted out.

“What? What do you mean?” Jupiter asked.

“The meeting place,” Bob repeated. “In the message, there was talk of a meeting place. We haven’t been there yet! Maybe there’s something there.”

“You’re right!” Jupiter said and started digging in his pockets. “Where is the piece of paper?” he murmured. “Where is it? Where... Ah, here it is! Here’s the message!”

Jupiter waved the note through the air, then held it in front of his eyes and read: “Meet me at our old meeting place Ω 5-15 tomorrow at noon...” The First Investigator paused and then whispered again: “Omega 5-15.”

“Omega 5-15—what does that mean?” Pete wondered. “And what does that have to do with a meeting place?”

“An old meeting place...” Bob corrected. “One that Julia and Ted have been before.”

“Where does a brother and a sister meet? Where?” Jupiter thought aloud. “At a playground, perhaps?”

Bob blew air out of his cheeks sceptically. “Hmm... but what does a playground have to do with the strange ‘Omega 5-15’?”

“Omega is the last character in the Greek alphabet and 5-15...” explained Jupiter. “Yes, 5-15... I don’t know... Perhaps a Bible passage? Maybe Ted means the last book in the Bible and there’s the fifth chapter, verse 15?”

Bob and Pete couldn’t help but chuckle. “Oh, come on, Jupe,” Bob laughed, “not everyone is as messed up educationally as you are. Keep your feet on the ground!”

“But why? It could be something like that!” Jupiter replied a little angry.

“Sure!” Pete seemed to agree with him with conviction. “And if you ask me, messages from the afterlife, deadly snakes, the last character, and the Bible—all of this is just crying out for us to go to the cemetery and look for something. Maybe there are some bored zombies running around who can tell us where Ted Applegate is hanging around writing e-mails?”

Jupiter emitted a strange gasp, opened his eyes. Then struck his fist into the flat of his hand and shouted: “Pete, you are a genius, even if you don’t know it! You’re a genius!”

Pete looked at his friend for a second without understanding, but then the realization flooded his brain like a huge wave. “Oh, no, wait, I didn’t mean it like that!” The Second Investigator raised his hands defensively. “You got me all wrong, Jupe! ... Bob, say something.”

“Cemetery!” Jupiter smiled, unimpressed. “That is it! That is the meeting place! The two meet at the grave of their mother! In the Christian faith, the first Greek letter, Alpha, is used to symbolize the beginning of life, and the last letter, Omega, refers to the end of life! The end of life is synonymous with death after which the body lies in a cemetery! And ‘5-15’ probably designates the place of the grave—perhaps fifth row, grave number 15!”

Pete shook his head wildly. "No, Jupe! Think about it! Omega could also refer to, uh, a, uh... the brand of watches... so perhaps, a watch shop, a boutique, or something like that..."

"Pete! Stop that nonsense!" Jupiter interrupted his friend gently. "It's the cemetery, believe me!"

Pete might have a lot of merits, but boundless courage was not one of them, and Jupiter knew that. Whenever it threatened to become eerie or even dangerous, Pete tried everything to escape this situation. He would perhaps invent some flimsy excuses or explanations, like what he just did. But as usual, all talking, placating and whining didn't help, because as usual, Jupiter would insist that he was right.

However, they could not leave immediately. For Jupiter had promised his uncle to help him in the afternoon with the cataloguing of items that Titus had purchased in a household liquidation. The Three Investigators did not arrive until after dark at the cemetery of St John's Church, where Julia's and Ted's mother was buried, as Mr Applegate had told them on the phone. Again Jupiter had held back the details and only told Mr Applegate that they wanted to check on something.

"Did it absolutely have to be tonight," Pete whispered and let the beam of his flashlight wander over the tombstones. "I like cemeteries in the bright morning light much better."

"But we do not have the time to consider your preferences," replied Jupiter. "If Julia was really kidnapped, every minute counts!"

"I think it's this way," Bob said pointing the way. "I think this is the fifth row."

One behind the other, the three boys crept through the darkness into which the cones of light from their flashlights struck restless flashes. Nothing could be heard except the crunch of the gravel under their feet, and every now and then some bird let out a cry.

"Number twelve," Jupiter said softly, pointing to a tombstone on his left, which rose out of the night like a man with broad shoulders.

"Gee, Pete! Stop stepping on my heels all the time," Bob whispered.

"I can't avoid it when you sneak along like that!" Pete replied, irritated.

Suddenly Jupiter stopped. "Fifteen, this should be it."

The three boys lifted their flashlights and directed them to illuminate the tombstone. Trembling, the light persisted on a carved inscription:

*Here rests Gladys Applegate,
Caring mother and beloved wife.*

*Your memory is the greatest treasure,
We will hold in our hearts forever.*

"Jupe, you were right!" whispered Bob. "The symbols really point to their mother's grave."

"Yes, but I don't know if this knowledge will help us much," Jupiter replied and slowly crept around the grave as if searching for something. "Ted and Julia wanted to meet here yesterday, and we don't even know if they did. And even if they did, then—"

"Hey, what's that?" Pete suddenly shouted and shone a light at a spot on the tombstone. "Look what's stuck there!"

Jupiter and Bob curiously approached and were as amazed as Pete at what they saw there on the tombstone. In a narrow gap, which opened up between two roses carved into the stone, was a small square card.

"That... I know that from somewhere," Pete said thoughtfully and twisted his neck to be able to look at the picture better.

“Sure, there’s another snake-like animal on there,” Bob realized.

Pete took the card out of the stone. “Yes, but that’s not what I mean. I meant the card itself. That’s... that’s...” Pete pondered and tugged at his nose. “Yes, exactly! I’ve got it. It’s a card from a Memory card-matching game. You know, that game where you first lay all the cards face down on the table and then you have to find identical pairs!”

“You’re right, Pete!” Jupiter said excitedly. “I know what you mean.”

The First Investigator suddenly fell silent and remained motionless on the spot. Pete and Bob also received an icy shiver, which instantly froze all their emotions and left them like lifeless bodies at the cemetery. And all three had heard the same thing—it was a strange sound, like someone striking two spoons together at short intervals.

10. Escape from a Snake

“Run!” Though Pete was still frozen in horror, he had squeezed out those words hoarsely. The Second Investigator grabbed his two friends and pulled them. The very next moment, he sprinted off from a standing start and yelled again as loud as he could: “Get away from here!”

Bob chased after Pete. But Jupiter needed a little longer to turn around. He was standing so awkwardly that Pete’s pull tore him to the ground. Unable to keep his balance, he tipped over lengthwise to the side and flew straight onto the ground.

“Jupe!” Bob had seen Jupiter fall from the corner of his eye and stopped immediately. “Jupe! Come on!”

“Oh gosh, where are you?” Pete cried out in panic and stopped suddenly. With trembling hands, he shone his flashlight at his two friends.

Jupiter put his hands into the damp earth and heaved himself up. He was already kneeling and about to answer his friends when the rattling sounded again, this time much closer.

“Did you see anyone?” Jupiter’s voice rolled over when Bob came back, grabbed him by the collar and yanked him up.

“Bob!” the First Investigator shouted excitedly as his friend dragged him. “Did you see anyone?”

“You better run,” Bob yelled at him. “And so do you!” he yelled at Pete, who was standing a distance away in a state of paralysis.

None of The Three Investigators had seen the rattlesnake, but the sound was so typical that they immediately realized what had caused it. And they knew that once the beast was close enough for them to see it, it might be too late to flee.

This fear alone was enough for the three of them to race across the cemetery, as if zombies were after them. They ran along the gravel paths, stepped over graves, jumped over tombstones in one go, mowed down a small flower bed, and suddenly they saw the dark shadow of a small chapel appear before them as if from nowhere.

“In there!” panted Jupiter, whose lungs whistled with every breath he took.

Pete was the first at the door. Twitching the light from his flashlight, he searched for the door handle, and then tore open the right wing. “Come on, move it!” he shouted excitedly and stared into the darkness of the cemetery while waiting for his two friends. But he saw nothing, or has he been mistaken?

Pete wiped his eyes as Bob flew over the threshold. A few seconds later, Jupiter had also reached the door. Then, there it was again, the rattling, loud, threatening and—very close!

“In here, Jupe!” Pete squealed in panic and pushed Jupiter into the chapel. Then he jumped after him, slammed the door shut.

Relieved, Pete nodded to his friends, and when Jupiter had puffed through with a few whistles, all three of them fell exhausted onto the stone floor.

For a few minutes, none of the three said anything. Each of them listened strenuously into the darkness between their own breaths. Would they hear that horrible rattling again? Or was the chapel door perhaps too massive? Could the sounds from outside not get through these cold walls? Perhaps the snake was looking for another way in? Somewhere this old house of prayer there might be a crack in the damp walls or a hole...

But nothing happened. Not a sound penetrated the silence inside the small chapel except for the gradually slowing breathing sounds of The Three Investigators. No rattling made the old door tremble, no arm-thick, black thing suddenly wound itself behind one of the pews.

"Whew!" Bob finally whispered and sat down a little more comfortably. "Have you ever run across one of those things in Rocky Beach?"

"Never," Pete gasped.

"But they're usually only found out in the desert," Bob said. "There's no way that this could possibly be a... a..."

"... Rattlesnake?" Pete helped him to his senses, because Bob apparently found this possibility so absurd despite all the signs. "No, it doesn't have to be," Pete continued, his voice dripping with appeasement. "Could have been a baby rattle we heard. Mothers are supposed to avoid the constantly crowded playgrounds and instead take their little bundle of joy to cemeteries. That might explain the rattling... Yes, it might."

"Fellas, get a grip on yourselves," Jupiter tried to calm his two friends. "Whatever it was, it seems to be gone now." The First Investigator slowly got up from the cold floor and started walking back and forth in the dark chapel. "And somehow I can't help but get the impression that the whole point of this action was not so much to cause us harm but to give us a proper fright. Because—"

"It succeeded..." Pete said dryly. "Totally."

"Because," Jupiter continued, "it is actually quite unlikely that what we assumed in the first place really corresponds to reality... This is about something else."

"This is about something else?" Pete mimicked Jupe. "How can you be so sure? You can't know that!"

"First of all, these snakes are really too shy to venture into the cities on their own," explained Jupiter. "And secondly, someone who has such beasts will not let them sneak around here for no reason, but is pursuing a certain purpose with them!"

"—To scare us!" Bob concluded.

"Exactly!" Jupiter agreed. "It's striking enough that there is a suspicious rattling sound when we are investigating a case that started with a cobra. But if they really wanted to harm us with a rattlesnake, they could have thrown it right at our feet instead of rattling around in the dark somewhere."

"That reassures me enormously," Pete noted. "That means the next time we can get this thing around our necks, if its master wants it?"

"As I said, I don't think that was a rattlesnake," replied Jupiter. "We were only made to believe it was and run away in panic."

"I believe that," Pete insisted, "and I would run again any time."

"And why do you think someone wanted to scare us?" Bob also rose now and knocked the dust out of his pants.

Jupiter squinted his eyes together to make what he had to say even more emphatic. "Because we still stick our noses into things that some people don't want us to... Unfortunately, they cannot stop The Three Investigators from doing exactly that—because I am absolutely certain that this haunting has to do with the secret of the Applegates."

"Jupe, I hate this!" Pete moaned in annoyance. "Why do you formulate your sentences in such a way that at the end, people still do not know what you are talking about?"

"He means we're moving on!" Bob interpreted.

"I know he meant that!" Pete yapped irritably and got up. "But he should finally stop trying to tie a knot in our brains."

Unfortunately, once in deep thoughts, Jupiter was never aware that he tended to twist his sentences into almost incomprehensible grammatical heights. He didn't mean any harm either as his superior intelligence simply went right along with him sometimes. But Pete couldn't stand that at all. He then felt that Jupiter always wanted to test him and show him how brilliant he was.

"So as I have said," Jupiter sighed and artificially rolled his eyes, "someone wants to prevent us from continuing working on the Applegate case... but we won't let that happen. We will continue to investigate." Jupiter paused for a moment and then said: "I think we should go back outside to the grave..."

"What? Are you crazy!" Pete yelled furiously, but Bob held him back.

"Peace, fellas! Pete, sit back down, and you, Jupe, stop fooling around too! We have more important things to do now than argue. We want to get out of here eventually, don't we?"

Grumbling, Pete sat down on the floor again, and Jupiter twisted his mouth to an apologizing smile.

In the darkness, Bob looked serious at first and then contentedly before saying: "At this point, I think it would be useful to think about the Memory card. Well, the card shows a cobra. And this card was found at the tombstone of Gladys Applegate, where Ted and Julia met or wanted to meet yesterday. So fellas, do you have any thoughts on that?"

Pete took the card out of his jacket pocket, in which he had quickly put it when he ran off earlier, and held the light of his flashlight on it. "Looks a bit like the one in Julia's e-mail, only a bit simpler and less colourful," he said and passed the card to Bob, who finally handed it to Jupiter.

"Hmm... you're right, Pete!" Jupiter mumbled and looked at the picture. "The resemblance is striking, and besides..." The First Investigator paused and scratched a little at one corner of the card. "Hey, fellas!" he suddenly shouted. "This picture is just glued on the Memory card! There is..." He slowly pulled the picture off. "There's something completely different underneath—a... beach ball!"

Jupiter handed over the card and the detached picture to Bob, who looked at them in amazement and then passed them on to Pete.

The Second Investigator blinked confused. "A beach ball? Now I don't understand this at all! What does a beach ball have to do with all this? I thought—"

"Hang on, Pete, hang on!" Jupiter turned on his thinking machine by pinching his lower lip. For two minutes, Jupiter walked up and down the chapel brooding and occasionally mumbled 'hmm' or a 'this could be...'

Finally, the First Investigator stopped and said: "Let's approach the matter logically... The purpose of Memory card-matching game is to find two identical cards out of a number of others, which are also present in pairs, with all cards initially lying face down on the table. Now if you interpret that for our case, you could say that one card, namely the one we have, has already been revealed. This could be an invitation to continue playing to find the second card." Jupiter looked at his friends expectantly.

"Yes, but what does it mean that one picture has been pasted over another?" Bob asked.

"Perhaps," replied Jupiter, "the person who put the card there wanted to remind us of the game, but it's not about the game itself, it's about this picture that was specially glued on."

Pete shook his head sceptically and waved the playing card in the air. "Fellas, did you ever get the idea that this card might have just been put there by accident? I mean, maybe some kids put it there and it's part of some sort of scavenger hunt or something?"

"That would be too much of a coincidence," contradicted Jupiter. "A cobra card at the grave of Gladys Applegate, where her son and daughter were to meet, the latter suddenly disappearing without trace after receiving a similar picture by e-mail? That can't be a coincidence. Besides, to my knowledge, there are no scavenger hunts for children in cemeteries any more than there are afternoon walks by mother snakes with their babies."

The First Investigator took a short break and then said: "So we have to look either for another cobra picture, however matching, or maybe something that isn't a picture at all, but has some link with a cobra!"

11. Hot News

"Bob, have another one serving! You hardly ate anything. You'll need your strength if you want to help me later." Aunt Mathilda didn't even wait for Bob's answer, but grabbed the huge ladle and smacked a big pile of mashed potatoes onto his plate.

Ever since Bob had surprisingly offered to help Aunt Mathilda out at the salvage yard in the afternoon before lunch, she had been extremely concerned about his physical well-being. After all, such an opportunity didn't come along every day and she didn't want the boy to give up after just one hour. Bob moaned resignedly and gave his two friends a pitiful look. But Jupe and Pete just grinned back in a good mood and were happy that Bob had fulfilled his promise so quickly.

There was a simple reason why Bob had taken the time to do so and it was because The Three Investigators were completely at a standstill in the Applegate case.

The day before, they had returned to Headquarters full of verve and confidence, having made it out of the chapel without further incident. At Headquarters, they had been searching for the cobra image all evening and late into the night, even though none of them had been quite clear what they were looking for.

They found nothing, absolutely nothing that even remotely resembles the picture on the card. They had tried the Internet, flipped through magazines and even started their famous Ghost-to-Ghost e-mail Hookup.

The Ghost-to-Ghost e-mail Hookup was a variation of their original Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup which employed telephone calls. In the e-mail version, The Three Investigators sent an e-mail to some of their friends requesting certain information. For this particular case, they wanted to know if someone recognized that picture of the cobra. If not, the recipient was requested to forward the message to as many friends as possible. Within a very short time, the request would reach many people, and it usually did not take long for one of them or even several of them to report back to The Three Investigators.

However, nothing came of it. Only an angry mother had e-mailed them back late in the evening and told them to stop scaring their son with horrible snake pictures.

The three boys had met again this morning at seven o'clock at Headquarters and continued their investigation. But the result had been as fruitless as the previous day. At some point, they just sat around in their trailer depressed, empty and completely perplexed and were finally glad that Aunt Mathilda called them for lunch.

"So I heard that there's a few houses affected by the mini-quake in Oxnard yesterday," Uncle Titus mumbled with his mouth full and pointed to the television set that was broadcasting the local news. "Maybe something for us to salvage... What do you think?"

"Better swallow the food before you say anything, Titus, and don't get the tablecloth dirty, it's clean," his wife rebuked him. Like her husband, she too was always looking for some stuff to buy for their salvage yard, but table manners and a tidy household were almost as important to her.

Titus mumbled something to himself and then shovelled the next load of porridge into his mouth. He had found out in so many years of marriage exactly when he was not allowed to contradict his wife, and it bothered him just a little that it was as good as always.

However, the couple completely missed the fact that the three boys were staring at the screen in the meantime. There was a reporter standing in front of some huge office complex, and behind her was a large sign which the camera now zoomed in. Pete breathed and pointed to the TV with the fork with a piece of cauliflower on it.

“I don’t believe it!” whispered Bob, staring at the flickering picture.

“Shh! Keep it down!” Jupiter jumped to the TV to turn the sound up. Mathilda and Titus were so surprised that they didn’t say anything at first and listened to the reporter with the boys.

“... Industries has landed a major government contract. As we have learned from reliable sources, this is a completely new type of computer program for the encryption and secure transmission of data. This was commissioned by the Department of Defence some time ago. It should be installed shortly and will revolutionize the data traffic of the American government and make it the safest in the world. This is Lois Lyneberger from KILM, live from Inglewood.”

There was a cut back to the studio and the studio presenter was seen. But as if it had been burned onto their retinas, The Three Investigators could still clearly see what they had just discovered on the company logo—a company logo that corresponded down to the smallest detail to the picture on the card they had found, and underneath it were the words: ‘Co.B.Ra Industries’.

The very next moment, one by one, the three boys cleared their dishes.

“Bye! Thanks for meal!” Jupe yelled and rushed out of the kitchen following his two friends.

Aunt Mathilda, with a knife on her hand and her mouth wide open, watched them in bewilderment. Only after the three of them had already got out the front door did she mumble: “Yes, but ... what about the work this afternoon?”

“Let it go,” Titus soothed his wife and turned the TV sound down. “We used to be like that.”

“I was never like that!” Mathilda growled and plunged the knife into a meatball.

The Three Investigators raced across the salvage yard and scrambled into Headquarters. There Jupe immediately switched on the computer and Pete and Bob crowded behind him to look at the monitor.

“Come on!” Jupiter snapped at the computer and clicked impatiently with the mouse on the pad.

“Cobra Industries!” snorted Bob. “So that’s it!”

“Co dot B dot Ra Industries,” Pete corrected him, “whatever that means.”

“At least now we have a clue as to why we keep tripping over these hideous beasts,” Jupiter said and waited for the search engine to produce results for the search word ‘Co.B.Ra Industries’. Two seconds later, the screen displayed out a number of possible links.

“There, that must be it!” Bob cried and pointed to the third entry on the list.

“www.Co.B.Ra.Industries.com!”

“No wonder why we did not get to this website earlier,” Jupiter said. “This company stylized their name to ‘Co.B.Ra’ instead of just ‘cobra’ so our earlier searches did not list it right at the top of the results.”

Jupiter clicked on the link, and in the next few moments the website of the company appeared. But even before this process was completely finished, The Three Investigators knew that they were on the right track.

“There... that’s... that’s...” Bob stammered and pointed to the screen. “That’s the e-mail image!” The Three Investigators saw the exact same cobra image they found in Julia’s e-mail

and the various other e-mails that had recently flooded Rocky Beach.

“No doubt about it,” Jupiter breathed and clicked on the picture. A new page opened, and the three boys were presented with an artfully animated homepage, on which besides some lines was a small company logo.

Pete excitedly placed the cobra image that Jupe had pulled off the Memory card on his desk and tapped it heavily. “Here, it’s really the logo of the company! Exactly the same image!”

“And now it is also clear what this ‘Co.B.Ra’ is supposed to mean,” Jupiter said and moved the mouse pointer over a name at the end of the homepage. “Colin B. Rafter—that is apparently the name of the company owner. Here it is.”

“The address, Jupe! Where is this company?” Bob asked. “The reporter said earlier, I think, it is in Inglewood, if I’m not mistaken.”

Jupiter opened a contact link on the website and the company’s address popped up.

“Yes, it is Inglewood,” Bob recognized immediately.

“Here, write it down on this piece of paper.” Pete handed Bob a piece of paper and read him the address: “23 Lime Street, Inglewood.”

Jupiter turned to his two friends, let air escape from his cheeks and made wide eyes. “Fellas, the pieces of the puzzle are coming together. I think we should take a look at this company.”

“Yes, I do, but not alone, right?” Pete didn’t mean it as a question and looked at Jupiter with the appropriate confidence. “I mean, now that we know—”

“Pete, we don’t know anything yet!” Jupiter interrupted his friend. “Shall we call Cotta and tell him that we now not only have a dead person writing e-mails from the afterlife, but that we have also found a modified Memory card stuck in a tombstone, and then something rattling drove us away? At most he will laugh at us and probably think twice in the future whether he should take us seriously! No, we don’t have any proof yet, and to get it, we should first go to Inglewood and look around a bit.”

“But just look around, yes!” Pete exclaimed. “Don’t crawl in and not come out again or anything like that! Understand?”

“Sure, Pete!” replied Jupe with a smile.

Pete turned abruptly to Bob and put his finger on his chest. “And you are witness to the fact that he said that! Understood?”

“Uh, uh... yes,” Bob stuttered confusedly.

“Just looking, Pete, just looking, I promise!” Jupiter smiled.

Little did the First Investigator know that he was going to lose his smile all too soon.

12. In the Snake Pit

The Three Investigators knew the headquarters of Co.B.Ra Industries already from the news and therefore found the building very quickly when they drove in Pete's MG through Lime Street in Inglewood, a western suburb of Los Angeles.

The building turned out to be an ugly, grey office block that had no architectural finesse whatsoever and instead stared threateningly at the viewer from numerous identical windows.

"Cosy little building," Bob remarked as Pete parked his car across the street. This time, however, the Second Investigator was very careful not to ignore any 'No Stopping' signs and loading bays. But as soon as everyone had got out, he slipped back into the car.

"Pete! What are you doing? Come on!" Jupiter shook his head impatiently.

"In a minute," Pete groaned and crawled backwards out of the car. "I wanted to take this with me. You never know," he said and swung his mobile phone back and forth.

The Three Investigators moved away from Pete's MG and took a look at the company premises from a distance. It was secured all around by a high barbed-wire fence, behind which a second fence ran along at some distance. At both fences, large spotlights were mounted at regular intervals, and on closer inspection, small black plastic insulators could be seen on the uppermost wire loops.

"Electric fences!" Pete marvelled. "They have electric fences! This place looks like a high-security prison!"

"And if I'm not mistaken, there are motion detectors between the first and second fence," Bob said, pointing his finger at one of the many boxes that were located just above the ground in the approximately two-metre-wide space between the two fences.

"Put your finger down, Bob!" hissed Jupiter. "Otherwise the guards at the gate will notice us!"

Indeed, the access to the company premises was also extremely protected. Two uniformed employees—one rather slender and the other a 150-kg colossus—stood with petrified faces behind a tightly barred, high steel gate. Even from a distance one could see the bulges under their vests, which must have been caused by some kind of weapon.

"What are they doing in this shed?" Pete asked, irritated. "I thought they were some kind of software company. But judging by the security measures, we're more likely to be looking at the First National Bank's gold depository."

"Wasn't there a talk of a government contract with this company?" Bob tried to recall the news report. "A program that would... that would..."

"—A program for the encryption and secure transmission of data," Jupiter quoted the newsreader from his incorruptible memory.

Pete pulled a doubting face. "And what's so important about a program like this that you build a second Fort Knox in the middle of L.A. and put Asterix and Obelix in front of it?"

Under normal circumstances, Jupe would probably have found Pete's remark funny, but considering this intimidating scenery, he was not in a mood to laugh at the moment.

"That's obvious," he replied earnestly. "If the government works with this program in the future, and for example encrypts all its secret messages with it, then the security of the whole country depends on this program not falling into the wrong hands. Just imagine, if an

unauthorized person finds out how to log into this program, all communications from the CIA, FBI, NSA and so on could be an open book!"

The First Investigator lowered his voice and thoughtfully continued: "I am surprised anyway that the media even got wind of such a secret project and was allowed to bring the matter to the public."

Pete and Bob remained silent for a while when they realized what a dangerous secret was probably hidden behind these grey walls. But it was exactly this insight that brought Pete back to the real reason for their visit.

"And now what have Julia and her dead brother got to do with all this?" he asked and scratched his head thoughtfully. "Do you see any connection here?"

"Well," Jupiter said and shrugged his shoulders, "that's what we're here to find out, isn't it?"

"Ah yes! And how, may I ask, do you plan to do that?" Pete looked at his friend suspiciously. "Shall we ask Laurel and Hardy over there by the fence if they've seen a girl about ten years old being dragged past them with hands and feet tied and a gag in her mouth?"

Jupiter didn't reply at all for a few seconds, but looked over to the entrance with increasing interest. "Not a bad idea," he murmured absently, "but I think something is happening. Look!"

The First Investigator nodded unobtrusively to the steel gate, and Pete and Bob immediately saw what he meant. One of the two guards had slipped through the gate with a walkie-talkie on his ear and was now looking down the street as if he was waiting for something or someone. The other had turned around in the meantime and now called his colleague over to him. He promptly turned around, stepped through the gate again and ran to his partner. Seconds later, the two of them went into the office building. Something must have upset them, because they made a mistake in those few seconds that they should never have made.

"The gate!" Bob exclaimed in amazement. "The guy left the gate open!"

"Indeed!" Pete marvelled.

Jupiter on the other hand was already one thought ahead. "Come on, fellas! This is our chance," he shouted excitedly and waved his friends to follow him.

But that was what Pete had been wanting to avoid at all costs. "Oh no!" he protested loudly. "This is not what we agreed on! You said to look around, not go in. Bob, you're a witness!"

Jupiter stopped abruptly and rolled his eyes. "But Pete, we're really just looking around! It's not my fault that they left the gate open. Now who's to say you can't go in?"

"Bob!" Pete commanded. "Say something!"

But Bob put on an apologetic face and then said in an appeasing way: "Jupe is right, Pete. The gate's open, we're not doing anything illegal!"

"Oh, come on!" Pete said. "You gotta be kidding me. Just because they didn't close the gate doesn't mean we can go in. A blind man could see that. They probably have snipers on the roof waiting for us to step over the threshold."

Pete had a few other arguments in store to prove to Jupiter and Bob that they were not allowed to enter this area, and he was not afraid to make these loudly known. But as valid as these reasons were and although it was of course perfectly clear to Jupe that they couldn't just walk in there because the gate wasn't locked, this discussion ended as usual.

Pete grumbled, Bob placated him, and Jupiter once again mentioned the 'detective's honour' of The Three Investigators. That was, as so often, his last and strongest weapon when

it came to getting his way through.

Of course, Pete didn't want to risk their good reputation either, and Jupiter almost always succeeded in presenting arguments in such a way that one had to fear if one didn't do what he thought was right.

Nevertheless Pete was still cursing himself as he trotted behind his friends towards the entrance. The cobra logo on the big company sign he had seen on TV earlier and which he now saw at close range as he passed the fence didn't exactly help to lighten his mood.

"So, fellas, remember!" whispered Jupiter as he squeezed through the gate gap. "If anyone catches us, we're lost. Understand?"

"Sure!" Bob replied.

"A likely story!" Pete sneered.

But on the whole way across the big yard nobody confronted The Three Investigators. The area seemed to be deserted, and if they hadn't seen the two guards earlier, the three boys could have assumed that the whole area was deserted.

Unnoticed, they reached the glass entrance door, which was also not locked. Jupiter held the door open for his two friends, took a last look over the outside area and then followed them into the building.

"Now what?" whispered Bob as they stood in the dreary lobby.

"Now we're really lost," Pete mocked.

Unimpressed, Jupiter looked around. Also in here, nobody was to be seen far and wide—no receptionist, no doorman, not even an employee could be seen in the lobby.

"Funny place," Bob said. "Where has everybody gone?"

"It's all right with us," Jupe said and pointed down a corridor that led away from the lobby on the right and got lost in bright fluorescent light further back. "This way!"

But as soon as The Three Investigators had walked the first few metres in the corridor, they clearly heard steps. They came from somewhere in front and echoed loudly like gun shots across the cold stone floor.

"Damn!" Pete exclaimed. "Now they'll get us!"

"Rubbish!" Jupiter remarked. "We'll go into the passage there! Follow me!"

Directly in front of them, another corridor branched off to the left. Bob was the last one to turn the corner just in time. From the corners of his eyes, he had seen a leg step out of another side corridor ten metres ahead.

"Run quietly," whispered Jupiter, "but quickly!"

The Three Investigators rushed down the corridor, turned into another one to the left and were about to take a staircase up when Jupiter suddenly stopped.

"Shh! Be quiet!" he whispered.

At the moment, Bob and Pete remained in place behind him and listened motionlessly into the bare staircase... but it was only for two seconds.

"Down! We gotta get down!" hissed Bob. Two storeys above them, someone was on their way down.

The three boys rushed down the stairs towards the basement. But it was not only the effort that took their breath away. Fear took hold—fear of the people who didn't see them, fear of being caught in here, fear of being cornered.

When they had reached the bottom of the stairs and were about to start walking, a door opened a few metres in front of them. Bob gave a panicky gasp, Pete gasped in horror and Jupiter—Jupiter was the only one who kept a clear head. He discovered a dark niche to his right, grabbed Bob and Pete and dragged them both into it.

Someone stepped into the corridor and stood there motionless for a few seconds. It almost seemed as if this person was listening—as if he had heard something. The three boys froze.

But they were lucky. A few heartbeats later, the door closed again with a soft creaking sound and whoever had stepped out of it, moved away in the other direction. After half a minute, it was absolutely quiet again in the basement corridor.

And then...

“Do you hear that?” Bob pricked up his ears.

“What is it?” Pete asked worriedly. “Steps? Do you hear footsteps again?”

“No, it’s more like—”

“Yes, now I hear it too!” Jupe whispered as he cautiously glanced around the corner. “It’s coming from... from over there. I think it’s from the room where the door opened earlier.”

“Jupe, stay here!” Pete pulled his friend’s sweater. “Don’t go out there! Are you crazy?”

“Do you want to spend the night here?” Jupiter snapped and freed himself from Pete’s grip. Then he crept slowly towards the door.

Bob crept after Jupe, and since Pete didn’t want to be left alone in the musty niche, he came after them. Finally, all three boys stood in front of a green-painted steel door and put their ears to the cold door.

“Someone is whimpering,” Jupiter said quietly after a while.

“Or crying,” Bob said.

“So let’s get out of here and call the police,” Pete suggested, looking at his friends expectantly.

“Why? Because someone is sitting in the cellar whimpering to himself?” Jupiter asked.

“No!” Pete contradicted indignantly. “Because there... because there...”

“I’m going in there now,” Jupiter ignored Pete’s desperate search for a good reason to get out of here as quickly as possible. And without waiting to see what his friends had to say, Jupe put his hand on the handle and pressed it down.

“Jupe! No!” Pete cried in horror, but the First Investigator had already stepped into the room.

13. No Way Out

"Julia!" Jupiter rushed to the girl, who was tied and gagged in a chair in the middle of the room. Behind him Bob and Pete rushed into the room.

Julia Applegate pulled her head up and looked at The Three Investigators with big, frightened eyes. Then the girl groaned incomprehensibly into the shabby cloth that had been tied around her mouth.

"Wait, I'll take this stuff off you!" Jupiter tried to calm her down. "Bob! Pete! The restraints!"

The First Investigator frantically tampered with the cloth while Pete and Bob attended to the leg and arm shackles. Still Julia groaned into her gag, staring incessantly at the opposite wall. Finally, Jupe released the cloth.

"Teddy!" Julia cried out. "You must free Teddy too!"

As soon as Pete and Bob untangled the last knots and the shackles fell off the girl, she immediately rushed to the door through which the three boys had just come in. But she did not run out, on the contrary, she slammed the door. And behind it lay leaning against the wall, also gagged and bound was a young man.

The three boys stared at him for a few moments as if he were a ghost. Then Jupiter laboriously gasped: "Is that... is that..."

"Teddy!" Julia cried and tugged at the ropes. "Help him please!"

The Three Investigators rushed over and worked on the gag and shackles. In just a moment, they had got the young man free.

Suddenly with a jerk, the door flew open.

Jupiter and Bob took a step back and Pete almost fell over the chair in shock. In the doorway stood a bull of a man who grinned at them gloatingly, waving a gun around unmistakably.

"So now we're all together, if I see things right. The genius and his sister have been honouring us for quite some time now, and you three have found your way here, thanks to our help." The hulking guy bared his yellow teeth and twisted his mouth into something like a smile.

Jupiter was the first to find words again with difficulty. "Thanks... thanks to your help?" he stuttered. "But... but what... I don't understand what..."

"Come on, fat boy! It's not that complicated!" The man put on a decidedly distressed face. "We've been following you three smart alecks for days now, and I must say you've kept us pretty busy. Then we thought the rattlesnake act at the cemetery would scare you off, but no, now you show up here. I don't know where you got the idea to come snooping around here."

The man emitted a disparaging growl. "Well, anyway, the boss told us to invite you in quietly, so we did. You just walked in exactly where we wanted you to be. It was really fun!" A belching laugh burst from the unshaven throat and the gun bounced restlessly up and down in the man's hand.

The Three Investigators understood immediately. Everything had been staged, and apparently had been for some time.

"Bummer!" whispered Jupiter, because he hadn't noticed earlier that it had been far too easy to enter the building. Now suddenly it struck him. The two guards had left when they appeared on the scene, then they had directed them to the right place in the building and finally let the trap snap shut.

"Up now, gentlemen," the man commanded, stepping back a little from the door. "The boss wants to see you. Come with me... Let's go!"

Julia looked at The Three Investigators pleadingly, but Jupiter lowered his eyes and shook his head imperceptibly. He knew that there was no way out. They had to do what the man wanted.

Pete and Bob helped Ted Applegate to his feet and gave him curious and uncertain looks. After all, until a few minutes ago, they had thought he was dead.

Then the three boys left the room, followed by Julia and her brother. With a loud bang, the crook threw the door shut and stomped after his prisoners.

"Up the stairs, go!" he ordered when they reached the end of the corridor.

Pete put his foot on the first step and then he felt it. Until now in all the excitement, he hadn't noticed that something was gently tapping his hip with every step, but now he remembered—his mobile phone!

He had the phone in his jacket pocket! And in fractions of a second, a way out of this dicey situation shot through his head, but it was so daring that he would have preferred to forget it right away. But he knew that they probably only had this one chance, and it was up to him now—just him.

"Psst!" he hissed as quietly as possible and turned his head a bit to the side where Bob was walking up the stairs next to him.

Bob reacted immediately and raised his left eyebrow, out of the sight of the big buffoon behind them, to signal that he had overheard Pete's hissing.

Pete let his right hand move very slowly to his jacket pocket and pulled the fabric so tight from the outside that the outline of the mobile phone was visible underneath.

Bob flinched and almost moaned out loud with surprise. Instead, he turned his head a little to the side and glared at Pete, seemingly to say: 'Are you crazy?'

Pete understood, but did not let himself be put off. With an angry look, he made it clear to Bob that he meant it seriously, that there was no other way.

Bob closed his eyes briefly and swallowed dry. Then he took the last three steps and finally gave his friend a barely perceptible nod. He realized that this might be the last chance and he knew that Pete needed him to do it. But it was dangerous—incredibly dangerous!

The Second Investigator turned his eyes forward again and looked for a suitable spot. About ten metres away further along the corridor they were walking through, there was an intersection with one corridor to the right and another to the left. He turned to Bob briefly and used his head to signal to him that there was where it had to happen.

But then a hot gush of blood shot into his face in horror. Twenty metres in front of them, someone suddenly turned the corner and came towards them!

"Hi, Matt! You got the gang at last?" the man yapped and took out a gun. "It's about time!"

"Shut up, Ken!" their guard replied rudely. "You should have helped me!"

At that moment, Pete had reached the intersection. He did not want to lose another second. It's now or never!

14. Pete Attempts to Escape

The next moment, Pete jumped into the left corridor and ran off. And he was fast, as he was the sports ace of The Three Investigators and trained hard for his physical fitness. But he was certainly not faster than a bullet.

Their guardian Matt was for a moment as befuddled as Jupiter. But the other crook in front, Ken, reacted quickly.

“Hey! Matt! The rat’s getting away!” Ken yelled and ran towards the intersection where Bob was.

At the same moment, Bob threw himself against Ken and brought him down.

“Damn!” Ken yelled out almost simultaneously. Then something rammed into Bob’s head and he blacked out. The crook had only let himself be knocked down briefly, but still managed to hit Bob over the head with his gun’s grip.

Jupe, despite the roaring threats of his tormentor, rushed up to try to stop Ken, but he was too slow. In any case, he managed to see Pete slide around the next corner with a good head start.

“You watch the rest of them, I’ll get that jerk!” Ken ordered Matt as he raced down the left corridor after Pete.

Pete sprinted along the corridor as if senseless, but his subconscious and his experience with such situations made him gradually clearer again. He looked around frantically. He didn’t see a pursuer at the moment, but he heard his footsteps.

“A room!” Pete thought to himself. “I need a room! I need a minute to make a phone call, just one minute!”

He now shook briefly at every door he passed, without slowing down his pace significantly. But they were all locked up. Pete turned once more. At any moment, his pursuer would come around the corner. He had to find a hiding place!

Suddenly he managed to open a door. Pete rushed into the room and immediately closed the door behind him. He wanted to lock the door, but there was no lock button or lever. Anyway, he swiftly ripped his mobile phone out of his pocket, and feverishly dialled Cotta’s number and...

“Come on! Come on! Come on!” Pete screamed hoarsely.

He couldn’t get a connection on the mobile phone! For some reason, the mobile signal was weak inside the building—maybe the walls were too thick, maybe somehow they had blocked mobile phones from making a call from in here to the outside. In any case, he could not get a connection.

Pete listened breathlessly. Footsteps could be heard outside, but his pursuer didn’t run. He walked—jolting at every door he passed. Pete flinched. The pursuer knows he was hiding in one of the rooms! What should he do? He had to...

The Second Investigator suddenly stopped and stared spellbound at a telephone that was on a desk a few metres away from him on the other side of the room. “That’s...” He breathed in disbelief and ran towards it.

He dialled Cotta’s number again. The dial tone sounded.

“Come on, pick up the phone,” Pete thought to himself. “Pick it up, Cotta!”

Suddenly, Pete heard that his pursuer's footsteps were getting closer. He had no time to lose. Without consciously thinking about it, Pete saw an eraser next to the phone. He grabbed it, positioned it next to the phone's switch hook and then rested the receiver on it.

Then he quickly rushed over to the opposite side of the room, as far away possible from the telephone desk, took out his mobile phone and proceeded to press on the numbers.

Just then, the door swung open.

"Well, hello!" Ken croaked as he saw Pete with the mobile phone. In a flash, he pointed his gun at Pete. Immediately, the Second Investigator stopped. Incidentally, he was standing in such a way that Ken could not see the telephone on the desk.

"Who are you calling, huh? May I guess? The police?" Ken asked. "We're not going to like that!"

The crook snatched the mobile phone and put it to his ear and listened.

"Hello?" he said in surprise. "No one there?"

"I... I couldn't call out," Pete replied as contrite as possible. "The signal is poor."

"You'd be in a lot of trouble if you did that, you rat!" Ken burst out.

"You're not going to get away with this!" Pete said loudly. "What are you going to do to us?"

"That's for the boss to decide," Ken replied and looked at Pete thoughtfully. Then he pushed him aside a little with the gun barrel. "Now shut up and come with me."

15. Babylonia

Ken pushed Pete across half the building and then took a lift deep under the ground. Meanwhile, the villain had put his gun back in his pocket after warning Pete not to try anything stupid. It was obvious that he did not want anyone to see that he was holding Pete captive.

They had now stopped in front of a flashing steel wall. Ken stepped next to Pete and, without letting him out of his sight for even a second, put a plastic card into a silver box that was next to the steel surface on the wall. The next moment, with a metallic hiss, the huge steel door slid to the side, revealing a very unusual room.

Almost circular and with a dome-like ceiling, a kind of hall opened up in front of Pete, which was crammed with computers of all sizes, gigantic wall monitors, and other electronic equipment. A dozen or so people were busily scurrying around, typing wildly on keyboards or watching the monitors with concentration. But hardly anyone raised his head to look at the newcomers—everyone was too absorbed in their work. That was roughly how Pete remembered the NASA command centre as he had sometimes seen on television.

“Get in!” Pete’s captor pushed him forward.

Completely dismayed, Pete stumbled into the hall. After a few steps, he realized that he was on a kind of large balustrade. It led around a smaller, open interior space, which was somewhat recessed in the middle of the control room, but was not completely visible from above.

But when he reached a narrow metal staircase shortly after, which he was supposed to go down, he could see what was down there.

“Jupe! Bob,” cried Pete as he discovered his friends who were standing down there, alongside Julia and Ted Applegate, and guarded by the humongous Matt.

At once, Jupiter and Bob raised their heads up and stared at Pete. A strange mixture of despair and relief was written on their faces.

“You caught the rat!” Matt cried as he saw Ken, who was stomping down the stairs behind Pete.

“Just in time, yes!” Ken replied furiously. “If it weren’t for me, we’d have the plague on our necks right now! The boss would have torn us apart if this guy had escaped!” One last push and Pete staggered back to his friends.

“Next time, take your fingers out of your nose and pay more attention!” Ken reprimanded Matt.

“You’re right,” Matt answered sheepishly and gave Pete a hateful look, who was standing wordlessly beside his friends.

“So?” Jupiter whispered and looked at Pete sadly.

The Second Investigator knocked his eyes down. “The mobile signal was weak. I couldn’t get a connection—”

“Shut up! No talking in here! Is that clear!” Ken yelled.

But Pete didn’t have to say anything more either. Even his disappointed look would have been enough to make it clear to his friends that his plan had failed. So Jupiter and Bob now

knew that they were all at the mercy of these thugs without any prospect of help because nobody had the slightest idea where they and the two Applegate siblings were at the moment.

In turn, The Three Investigators did not know what would happen now and why they were being held here at all... but that was about to change.

"A very good day to you, gentlemen," a voice roared down from the balustrade.

The three boys and Julia looked up in horror, while Ted did not even look up. He apparently already knew the bald fat man, who now rolled down the stairs to them with a greasy grin on his lips.

"May I introduce myself to those of you who do not yet know me. My name is Rafter, Colin B. Rafter, and I am the proud owner of this nice little company."

"You're a monster and a cheat," Ted Applegate burst out.

"Now, now!" Rafter shook his head in indignation and affectionately waved his sausage-shaped index finger back and forth. "My dear Ted," he said, apparently offended, "is this how you thank me for taking you in and even making you my most important employee? Tsk, tsk! I have to say, you disappoint me."

"What a load of hogwash!" Ted Applegate cried out. "Most important employee? Don't make me laugh. You knew and you know damn well that I'm the only one who can finish your program for you. That's why you needed me."

One of Rafter's henchmen pulled out a gun to shut Ted up, but his boss stopped him. "No, Matt!" he whispered. "Don't always be so rough! Perhaps our differences can be settled in a constructive conversation."

Pete leaned over to Jupiter and whispered into his ear: "He talks almost as annoying as you sometimes do."

"Ah, excuse me!" Rafter said with an act of contrition. "I'm a bad host! I only talk to my expensive staff and forget all about their friends! And yet you are those brave investigators, if I am not mistaken! And I'm sure you have lots of questions, don't you?"

"Well, Mr Rafter, you're absolutely right," Jupiter said. "For instance, I'd be interested to know why you are keeping the three of us, Julia and Ted here!"

"Oh, hold on! Silly! You're just supposed to help Ted finish hatching our little baby. He needs you, believe me!"

"If you think I'm going to finish programming Babylonia so you can get up to your dark tricks, you've got another thing coming," said Ted with contempt.

"But what are you talking about, Teddy?" Rafter arched his fleshy lower lip into an offended pout. "Why are you so grouchy today?"

Ted Applegate's eyes were full of hatred as he hurled at Rafter: "You know exactly what I'm talking about, Rafter! And because I refused to finish the program, you have now taken my sister and three hostages, so that I can do what you want! Rafter, you're a lousy—"

"Ho, ho, ho!" Rafter interrupted him. "We don't want to be abusive, do we?" The fat man scratched behind his wobbly earlobe and moved one step closer to Ted. "But you're right. I want you to finish Babylonia for me, yes. You know, we were so worried about you when you suddenly disappeared four weeks ago. And then..." Rafter sniffed and wiped his wet piggy eyes with a handkerchief, "then we heard you were dead! Goodness, I was desperate, wasn't I, Matt?"

"Hmm... well, yes," grunted the big buffoon, sucking snot through his nose.

"There you go, Teddy," Rafter turned to Applegate again. "But then suddenly we learned that you might have escaped with your life in that terrible, terrible accident! I tell you, I cheered with joy when I got the news! Didn't I, Ken?"

"Was so," Ken muttered apathetically.

The Three Investigators looked at each other in a very meaningful way. Pete even stuck out his tongue a little, indicating that he almost felt sick from the cynical show this fat man was putting on.

But Rafter took no notice. Instead, he clapped his fat, sweaty hands and smiled sweetly at Ted Applegate. "Well, here you are—back to finish what you started so brilliantly."

Ted hesitated with his answer. Then he squeezed his eyes together into narrow slits and hissed through his almost closed lips: "I will not do a thing, Rafter!"

A dangerous flicker flashed in Rafter's eyes. Then his hand shot forward and at a speed no one would have expected from this greasy colossus, he grabbed Ted Applegate by the collar and pulled him so close that their noses almost touched. His face had turned fire-red in a split-second and his intermittent, almost asthmatic breaths made Applegate turn his head to the side in disgust. From one heartbeat to the next, the previously so eager and oily company boss had transformed himself into a wheezy, dangerous monster.

"Watch this, you little vermin!" Rafter snorted and sparkled viciously at Applegate. "You're gonna sit on your bony butt and finish this program. I know it only needs a few more steps, but unfortunately only you know them. I'll give you two hours to do it, and then it's over! ... If Babylonia still won't work the way I want, then my friend..." The fat man lifted his free index finger and with a horrible sound, drove it across his throat.

16. Revelations

Rafter pushed Ted Applegate away with a grunt and nodded at his two henchmen. They rushed over immediately, grabbed the young man's right and left arms and manoeuvred him to the only workstation in this lower platform. It was a huge terminal with an oversized monitor.

Rafter looked at his watch. "One hour, 59 minutes," he said, giving Ted an icy look. Then he turned around, stomped up the metal staircase and disappeared.

Ted Applegate sat curled up and motionless in front of the monitor. But then the soft sobbing of his sister reached his ear and brought him back from his rigidity.

"Come here, Juju!" he said calmly, opening his arms.

Immediately his sister flew to meet him and laid her face on his shoulder. She trembled as he gently stroked her hair.

"Can't you guys get out of here?" Ted growled at the two hoodlums who watched the scene unmoved. "I'll do what your boss wants, but I can't work with a gun pointed at my neck all the time!"

The two looked at each other questioningly and finally both nodded almost simultaneously.

"No problem," said Ken. "You know what happens if you mess with the boss." They both trotted away with a spiteful grin on their lips.

"What nasty disgusting creatures!" Pete remarked when the two bozos were out of earshot.

"You can say that again," replied Ted Applegate, still trying to calm his sobbing sister. "Hello, I'm Ted, by the way," he greeted Pete, because the opportunity had not yet presented itself. A faint smile flitted across the young man's face.

"Hello," replied the Second Investigator. "I'm—"

"Pete Crenshaw," Ted said. "Second Investigator, expert in lock-picking, the sports ace of The Three Investigators, proud owner of a red MG, great—"

"Hey, how do you know all this?" Pete wondered.

"He knows us inside and out too," Jupiter said with a smile. He and Bob had already had a little chance to talk to Ted earlier when Pete was on the run.

"I've been a big fan of yours for years and have always followed your cases with great interest," Ted explained, while Julia now broke away from her brother. The girl had calmed down a bit, but the horror of Rafter's threat had drained all her strength. She slowly slid to the ground, leaning exhausted and almost apathetic against her brother's legs.

"That's why," Ted went on, "I sent Julia to you. I couldn't trust anyone, not even the police. But with you, I am sure you would help me."

Pete raised his hand and blinked confusedly. "Wait, there's something I'm not quite clear about. I mean, I'm happy for you that you're doing well so far—although that might sound a bit cynical under the circumstances—but until an hour ago, I still assumed that you—well, that you..." Pete said, "that you—are dead. I don't get it."

"We feel the same way," Jupiter confirmed seriously and looked at the young man questioningly. "How can this all be explained?"

"You're right," Ted Applegate said and looked at his watch. "We have a little time left although I only need a few minutes for this stuff here..." Ted vaguely pointed to the computer. "I can give you the most important information in a nutshell."

He took a deep breath and then continued: "Here's what happened... I've been working for Rafter for about half a year on a computer program that provides secure messaging. The government commissioned this encryption program to secure their worldwide communications."

"Babylonia?" Jupiter asked. "Is it the program Rafter mentioned earlier?"

"Right," Ted said. "Babylonia is to be sold to the government as the most advanced and most secure encryption program available today. Around five weeks ago, Rafter asked me to install a back door into the program through which he could get into it at any time. This will allow him to decode all messages and information. I even have an idea what he is going to do with them—he wants to sell them to the highest bidder. I told him clearly that I would not participate in this. But he just laughed and in the end, threatened to hurt my family if I didn't do what he wanted."

"That rascal!" Bob burst out.

"He's much more than that," Ted agreed with him. "Anyway, I saw my only way out was to fake my death to protect myself and my family. So I let my car run over the cliffs and went into hiding so that people thought I was dead."

"Oh, boy!" Pete moaned and looked incredulous at Ted.

"On the hindsight, it wasn't really a good plan because after a while, I realized that this did not solve the problem... If someone else managed to finish the program, the government would sooner or later face enormous difficulties, and no one would know what the problem was, namely the manipulable program."

"But what could I do? How could I have prevented all this? I also had to be extremely careful, because I knew that Rafter would keep his eyes and ears open. He is extremely suspicious, and I knew that he would doubt my death for a while, especially since my body had not been found. I then decided to contact Juju because no one else would have believed that I was still alive. I might even have ended up in jail if I had contacted the police—not to mention the fact that Rafter is far too smart for the police anyway."

Ted Applegate took a short break and then continued: "But I couldn't just go home, because I assumed that Rafter had our house watched. So I decided to send a stego message to Julia from an Internet café. I downloaded Stego Lab from the Internet and used it to incorporate the message into the image that decorates Rafter's homepage—the cobra. Sending messages like this was always a kind of hobby of ours and I knew that Julia could do something with it."

"I asked her to contact you so that we could look for a solution together. I was sure that you would pursue the matter and I was confident that you would come up with something."

"And why," Bob interjected, "did you send that picture umpteen times to all sorts of people, including the Rocky Beach Chief of Police?"

Ted contemptuously let air escape from his cheeks and looked grimly at him. "I wanted to scare Rafter. I wanted him to know that someone was on to him."

"Snakehunter!" Pete said. "Now I get it."

Ted nodded. "I wanted to corner Rafter and hoped he'd make the odd mistake. I knew that sooner or later, he would stumble across the picture, especially after I anonymously informed the press about his deal with the government."

"Oh, so that was you!" Jupiter understood. "I was wondering who would release such sensitive information to the press."

"Yes, it was I." The young man hesitated and his eyes darkened before he spoke any further. "I underestimated Rafter, though. I imagined that he could somehow monitor Juju's e-mails. That's why I sent the pictures to many addresses like spam. It should look like a coincidence that Julia also received such an e-mail. If only she had received this picture, he would have immediately guessed that I was still alive. Again, this wasn't really foolproof as I never thought he would be able to decode the stego message, in which he did."

"Oh my goodness!" Pete came out, anticipating what must have happened next.

Ted nodded. "You can guess what happened next..."

"Rafter grabbed Juju." He gently stroked Julia over the head and then said in a voice trembling with rage: "I don't even want to think about what he did to her to find out where we were supposed to meet. But Juju didn't tell him a word and acted as if she didn't know what I meant by that strange abbreviation."

"Ω 5-15?" Bob asked.

"Yes," Ted confirmed. "Juju and I once created this as the secret code to the location of our mother's grave."

Jupiter looked at the man and his sister with compassion and then turned to Julia. "They caught you shortly after you left our place, didn't they?"

Julia nodded weakly.

"That's why you never got to your friend Chloe," Bob thoughtfully concluded.

Bitterly, Ted continued: "Rafter set heaven and hell in motion to find me as soon as he knew I was alive. After all, this business is about huge sums of money to him, and he doesn't want me messing that up. Somehow, on the morning of the meeting, he tracked me down to my hiding place—a crummy motel room where I had rented under a false name. I could still see from my window how his two lackeys enquired at the reception, but I knew immediately that any escape was pointless. But I didn't give in and feverishly thought about what else I could do."

"The Memory card!" Pete suddenly remembered. "It was from you."

Ted wrung a smile from himself and said: "You three are really something, you know that? This card was actually nothing more than a last-ditch effort. Before the two goons stormed into my room, I stuck a picture of the company's logo of the cobra on a Memory card that I found in the motel room. Then I persuaded them in tears for me to visit my mother's grave one last time... after which I would do anything they wanted. Luckily they were stupid enough to agree, and I left the card at the tombstone. But I never thought for a second that that would help me. You not only found the card, but also interpreted it correctly. It is simply phenomenal! I don't think anyone would be able to figure that out so quickly!"

Ted Applegate looked at The Three Investigators with admiration. But soon a dark shadow again clouded his vision.

"But they also got Julia..." Bob said.

"I was horrified when I saw that they had captured her as well," Ted revealed. "You know I don't care what happens to me. But since they have Juju, I have no choice. I must do what Rafter wants."

Carefully, he helped his sister to her feet and smiled confidently at her. "Don't worry, Juju, nothing's going to happen to you," he said as calmly as possible. "Let me just finish this and we'll get out of here, huh?"

Julia Applegate nodded bravely and wiped the tears from her face. But suddenly Bob had a terrible suspicion.

"Tell me, do you guys really think they're gonna—"

"Bob!" Ted Applegate interrupted abruptly and gave him a strange look as if trying to tell him something.

Bob blinked confusedly and Pete didn't give the impression that he would understand that either. Then the First Investigator pierced his two friends with glances seemingly trying to tell them with his eyes something he wouldn't want to say out aloud.

For a few seconds, Bob and Pete looked quite perplexed, but then they eventually understood. Bob opened his eyes and mouth in horror and Pete turned pale. It suddenly became clear to them what the signal meant. Ted and Jupiter didn't want to say out what they had evidently been aware of for a long time as they probably did not want Julia to be unnecessarily terrified—even if this could no longer be avoided at some point. The fact was that Rafter would not let anyone of them go at all!

Pete and Bob panicked and realized that it was madness to think that that fat man would let all of them go home so easily after Ted had done his job here. They could raise the alarm immediately and the valuable program would no longer be worth the price of a blank CD! No, Rafter couldn't risk letting them go! But what that meant in turn was clear...

"We must... we must..." Pete stuttered worriedly. "Can someone help us? Is everyone in here in cahoots with Rafter?" The Second Investigator questioningly pointed up to the numerous employees on the balustrade, who still didn't take any notice of what was going on at the lower platform or didn't want to take any notice of it. With a pleading expression on his face, he looked at Ted.

"I have no idea who knows everything," Ted said resignedly. "And besides, nobody would believe our story... Rafter would make sure of that."

"But then—" Pete began.

"Ted," Jupiter suddenly interrupted the conversation, "the front door up there... does it use an electromagnetic locking mechanism?"

Ted frowned because he didn't know what Jupiter was getting at. "Yes, that's right," he then slowly replied.

"So no keys?"

"No, an electromagnetic mechanism locks the door, why?"

"Ah yes," Jupiter ignored Ted's question and instead occupied his lower lip for a few seconds.

Finally, Jupiter had a new question. "And that computer you're sitting at, can it access the automated system for this building?"

Ted looked at Pete and Bob questioningly. But they both just shrugged. They had long since given up trying to understand Jupe when he was consulting with his lower lip. They just had to wait in such cases.

"Yes," Ted replied. "Any component within this building that can be automated can be controlled from this computer here. This includes the lifts, electricity, backup power supply, doors, security alarms, and air conditioning system... But what do you want to do?"

Jupiter walked towards Ted and gently pushed him aside. "Let me take a look," he said with an enigmatic smile. "I think you can program a trick..."

17. The Secret Entrance

"Well, my dear friends, this is it!" Colin B. Rafter appeared at the top landing of the stairs and stepped gracefully down the narrow steps like a fully eaten hippo.

Behind him, his two hyenas, Ken and Matt, jumped up and down and greedily licked their lips. Now they would prey on someone—except that it wasn't clear who the victim would be.

"Time's up, game over, whatever it was, it doesn't matter!" Rafter whinnied at his simple rhyme and added: "Oh, I should have done something artistic in my life! I'm gifted, don't you think?"

The two clowns, Ken and Matt, cackled, even though they didn't know what they were laughing at. The Three Investigators, on the other hand, looked bored and Ted Applegate didn't make a face, but stared at Rafter expressionlessly while Julia snuggled up to him.

"All right, my dear Ted, let's take a look at your masterpiece, shall we?" Rafter twisted the corners of his greasy mouth into a big smile. "As I can see, you've had plenty of time, or you wouldn't have waited so idly for me! But I always knew you were a genius! My best horse in the stable!" Again he let a rumbling laugh roll over his fat lips.

Then Rafter directed his froggy eyes to the monitor. He pulled up another chair next to Ted and squeezed his monstrous rear end onto the seat.

"Now let's see what this baby can do..." he said as he laid his spongy paw on Ted's right shoulder.

Ted slowly turned his head and looked at Rafter with disgust. He picked up Rafter's fleshy paw carefully, as if it were a poisonous insect, and then just dropped it.

"Oh, Teddy! Still upset?" Rafter looked seemingly distressed and sniffled in disappointment. But the next moment, he turned Ted's chair around with a jerk, so that he was now facing the monitor.

"Begin," he commanded, and every trace of a smile had suddenly disappeared from his nasty bull terrier face.

"All right," Ted murmured softly but unimpressed and entered his first commands into the keyboard. "As you wish..."

The two scoundrels approached curiously and gaped over their boss's shoulder. This gave The Three Investigators the opportunity to approach the stairs very slowly and unnoticed. As if by magic, the three boys moved closer and closer to the bottom of the staircase.

Then Jupiter gave Julia a signal that she should creep up to him. With her back to the wooden wall, Julia slid slowly along it towards Jupiter. An attentive observer might have thought that she was studying the unusual grain of the wooden panel. So slowly she moved that nobody would notice that she was going further and further away from her brother and the three stooges. Of course, she had been initiated into Jupiter's plan and had only been waiting for a favourable opportunity to sneak away. Finally, she reached next to The Three Investigators.

"Well done, Julia!" Pete whispered in praise of her.

Then the three boys and the girl stared spellbound at what was going on at the computer in front because they knew that, any moment now, something would happen.

"So..." Ted began. "So far you know how the program works normally. The encryption and decryption module offers all these possibilities to the user."

"But there's something else that nobody knows about, isn't it?" Rafter rejoiced and rubbed his hands gloatingly. "The secret entrance, so to speak!" This time the fat man laughed so exuberantly at his own joke that hundreds of little spit drops splattered through the air, leaving a disgusting and smeary film on the screen.

"The secret entrance, so you say," Ted calmly repeated, smiling mysteriously. "No one knows what's coming."

"That's it, Teddy!" Rafter roared even louder and slapped Ted on the back like a friend.

This time, however, Ted didn't let himself get upset, on the contrary, he continued to talk with an emphatic equanimity: "To access the secret entrance, you have to enter a particular login ID and password, followed by a certain key press combination. It is out of the ordinary and is so obscure that nobody should even accidentally discover it. I have programmed this especially for this purpose. It's very important that you remember the sequence well!"

"Okay, that sounds good," Rafter said breathlessly. "So show me how it works." The colossus's mouth was open with impatience, and a thin disgusting saliva thread was drawn from it to the ground.

The Three Investigators and Julia held their breath in suspense. In the next few seconds, they would know if their plan would work.

"Well," Ted continued, but then seemed to change his mind. "Mr Rafter, perhaps you'd like to try it yourself now? Here you go." Ted Applegate stood up and pushed his chair away so that Rafter could move in front of the computer.

Rafter nodded enthusiastically. He rolled his chair over—and suddenly stopped! Sceptically he pulled his eyebrows together and looked at Ted Applegate.

Pete startled! He didn't even feel Julia's fingernails clawing into his arm. Bob and Jupiter also froze in horror. Had Ted been too sure of himself? Had he overdone it with his sudden politeness? Had Rafter smelled a rat?

But the facial features of the company boss relaxed again. He was too greedy for the climax of the performance and the goal of his criminal dreams.

At the same moment, Ted took a quick glance at The Three Investigators, his sister and especially the stairs. He had memorized the way and the distance exactly for that was now vital for survival. Then he let the image of the upper balustrade and the search for the exit appear in his mind's eye. However, all this happened in a split-second, and Rafter and the two knuckleheads did not suspect anything.

"Let's begin..." Rafter asked breathlessly, bending over the keyboard.

Ted cleared his throat and tensed every muscle before saying: "You are now at the common login page. So you need to first enter the login ID and password as with any normal user, but don't click the 'OK' button."

Rafter proceeded to do as directed. "Done... then what?"

"Instead of clicking the 'OK' button like a normal user, you have to use the keyboard and press the 'Control-Escape-End' key combination," Ted said. "That is, press and hold down the 'Control' and 'Escape' keys at the same time, then press and release the 'End' key."

"All right! 'Control-Escape-End,'" Rafter said. "Let's go!"

He pressed that three-key combination, and two seconds later a faint beep came out of the computer signalling that he had activated something.

18. Chaos

In one breath, the computer gave a strange, almost pitiful howl, as if it was writhing in pain. Then the screen sucked what it had just displayed into itself and went blank. At the same moment, hideous crackling noises echoed through the whole control centre, and before the first surprised scream screeched through the room, it was pitch dark!

All the monitors had suddenly turned off, all the lights had gone out, not the slightest light was on anywhere! Absolute, darkness had swallowed everything like a gigantic throat and transformed the huge hall into a contouless, blind mush.

Almost immediately, the darkness awoke to chaos. Cries of horror, surprise and anger were ringing through the night, hands groped their way forward, clattering feet could be heard, cries filled with surprise, and in the midst of this lightless turmoil, five people ran for their lives.

“Don’t let go!” cried Jupe. “No matter what happens! Run, but don’t let go!”

The First Investigator was the closest to the staircase when the power failed, thanks to his idea and Ted’s manipulation of the building automation system. Jupe had taken Julia by the hand as discussed, who also held on to Pete, who in turn pulled Bob behind him. Ted was able to grab Bob’s hand after the lights went out, and when he shouted ‘Go!’, Jupiter stormed up the stairs.

Jupe had counted the steps earlier. There were twelve, and Jupiter panting the individual numbers in front of him now ran up the narrow metal staircase. When he reached the top, he turned right, walked a few steps further and then waited until Ted had reached the top step.

“Now!” Ted shouted into the darkness and Jupiter was already about to run on when an almost animal-like scream tore the darkness apart.

“Stop them! Stop those damn dogs!” yelled Rafter. It had obviously taken him a few moments to realize what had happened. But then he suddenly realized that he had been tricked, and now he roared out all his anger—an excessive rage like a wounded animal.

“Go on!” Jupiter hissed and pulled Julia with him towards the exit. He knew that the darkness was on their side.

They had to circle the upper level about a quarter of the way around if they wanted to reach the exit. Ted had earlier briefed them on the layout of the building. But The Three Investigators would not be able to see what obstacles could stand in their way to get there.

Jupiter was the first to notice that there were. He ran into probably what was a water cooler and banged his knee violently. But he suppressed the cry of pain so that he would not alert Rafter’s bloodhounds.

“Hey, you blockhead!” Rafter suddenly yelled. “That’s me! Get your filthy hands off me!”

“Sorry, boss,” Matt whimpered. Apparently, he and Ken grabbed anyone who stood in their way and had just caught their own boss.

Bob was about to laugh about this mishap when he banged his face against someone’s shoulder. He and his shadowy counterpart moaned almost simultaneously.

“Hey, watch where you’re going!” That was Pete. Without saying a word, Bob hurried on.

In the meantime, Jupe had fought his way limping to the outer wall of the building. He scanned it with his free hand in search of the door opening. And if the electromagnetic lock didn't malfunction and no other problem had arisen, then as Jupiter fervently hoped, the door would now be wide open.

The First Investigator dragged himself on step by step, patting himself against the cold wall at small intervals, dragging Julia behind him as he had done all along, who had begun to whimper in fear. And finally... finally his hand felt the end of the wall! This could mean that they were approaching the front door of the building.

"Hey!" Ted cried out at the end of the chain. "Let go of me, you—" he uttered. Then The Three Investigators heard a dull thud and shortly afterwards, a loud rumble.

"Teddy!" Julia screamed and broke away from Jupiter and Pete.

"Julia! Don't!" Pete and Jupiter shouted almost simultaneously.

"Come back here!" Jupiter cried into the darkness after her. "We have to—"

The First Investigator's warning died suddenly on his lips. Someone's hand had wrapped around Jupe's mouth and another grabbed his arm and turned it painfully around his back. Jupiter opened his eyes in panic in the darkness. But all he could smell was the stern sweat of the person behind him, and he could hear his strained gasp.

"Oh, gosh, somehow they got us!" it shot through his head.

He turned, kicked around and even tried to bite the hand holding him, but against a stronger man, who obviously knew exactly what he was doing, Jupe had no chance.

He could hear Pete and Bob gasping in desperation, fighting a short, hopeless struggle and finally falling silent and moaning. After that, Jupe was pressed against the wall.

Suddenly, a glaring bright beam of a flashlight appeared and drilled into his eyes. The light penetrated through his wide-open pupils, giving him flash blindness for a few moments.

"Jupiter?"

The First Investigator winced at the sound of the voice... It was somebody familiar...

"That's... that could be... that is..." he stammered.

"Jupiter, is that you?"

"Inspector Cotta?"

"Yes."

"Mmta Ntta?" Pete stammered incomprehensibly with a hand covering his mouth.

And all of a sudden, several flashlights were switched on. The Three Investigators blinked dazedly into the sudden bright light that was pointing towards them in many directions. After a short time, the contours of people, of very many people, began to emerge before their eyes, and the three looked into the grinning face of Inspector Cotta!

"But... but... I don't understand... how..." the First Investigator stuttered and stared stunned as six or so other police officers swarmed into the building and brought the situation under control.

Pete and Bob got up from the floor and went up to the inspector. Only now did The Three Investigators see that the Inspector also had Mr Applegate with him.

Immediately, Mr Applegate rushed forward to Julia and both of them helped Ted to his feet, who had apparently been caught and knocked down by one of Rafter's sidekicks. Then all three fell into each other's arms, and with tears streaming down his face, Mr Applegate kept holding his supposedly dead son as if he couldn't believe that he was now seeing him alive and well.

"So, inspector," Jupe asked. "How did you find us?"

"I got Pete's phone call that—"

"That worked, didn't it?" Pete burst out.

"I thought you didn't get a connection on your mobile phone?" Jupe asked Pete.

Pete went on to explain that he had called Cotta on the landline telephone but had not managed to wait until he picked up the call. Just before Ken entered the room, Pete described how he had left the line on using an eraser to keep the receiver off the hook without Ken realizing it.

"Yes, when I picked up the call, I could hear the conversation between Pete and the other chap," Cotta continued and looked at Pete. "Then I sensed that you were in serious trouble. I have been going over everything you told me about this case, but I couldn't make sense of the whole story. Even Mr Applegate couldn't give me more information... Anyway, from Pete's call, we could trace your location."

Jupe and Bob jumped on Pete and congratulated him effusively on his efforts.

Cotta then became serious again. "So can you quickly tell me what this is all about?"

"Yes," Jupiter said and let his gaze wander a distance behind him. "Back there, that fat man is Colin B. Rafter, and he's behind a scam to steal information from the government."

Cotta followed Jupiter's index finger and discovered an extremely plump and profusely sweating man, who was held in check by one of his policemen. Next to him stood two rather gloomy looking figures who were also guarded by policemen.

Jupiter continued: "And the two beside him are his henchmen. To what extent the rest of the staff is involved I cannot tell, but I believe most of them are unaware of their boss's sinister scheme. As to the details, you have to ask Ted Applegate."

In the meantime, the Applegates had joined Cotta and The Three Investigators. Still with tears in his eyes, Mr Applegate patted each of the investigators on the shoulder one after the other and looked at them with gratitude. He did not anything, as he was still too moved and overwhelmed by the surprise reunion with his two children.

"So you are Ted Applegate..." Cotta turned to the young man. "I presume you have a lot of explaining to do. But first, let my men get those three out of here and to the police department for questioning."

Cotta then turned to The Three Investigators. "Before we go, can you tell me what happened here a while ago? My men and I have been standing in front of this door for quite a while..." Cotta pointed over his shoulder at the steel door which was now opened. "We had no idea how to get in. Suddenly, the door opened and just after we came in, the power went off."

"Well," Pete tapped Jupiter on the shoulder, "that we owe to our mastermind Jupiter Jones, who together with Ted Applegate, manipulated the building automation system for our escape."

Jupiter smiled and then proudly explained: "When I found out that the whole building's automation system could be controlled by computer, I asked Ted to program a sequence of events—first, to open the doors, then disable the backup power supply, and lastly shut down the main power supply. These sequence of events was to be triggered off by a certain key stroke combination. Incidentally, we got Rafter to do it."

"Really good, Jupiter," Cotta praised the First Investigator and nodded approvingly at him.

"Yes, that's our Jupiter Jones," Bob added, "the mastermind of The Three Investigators, who is also now the mastermind for crashing computer systems!"